# THE ETHICAL VALUE OF DICKENS' HUMOR AND SATIRE

BY

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## Chapter I

# THE CONFLICT OF OPINION CONCERNING DICKENS AND ITS RELATION TO THE PRESENT INQUIRY

From Dickens' own day, when his exuberant genius was pouring itself forth as quickening waters upon the arid surface of Victorian literature, to these days of ours, when he is still read, loved, and laughed over, there have been waged over the living body of his works the controversies of the critics, who, being but mortal themselves, cannot agree as to whether immortality should be its due. It is natural that there should have been, and should still be, a great divergence of opinion about an author of such amazing productivity and virility as Dickens. Enthusiastic Dickensians hailed him as the greatest reformer of his age, and more coldly disposed critics have accorded him the scant praise of being a mere humorist and nothing more. Two dominant features of the writer have been stressed again and again by the critics - with variations, of course - but continually returning to the question of what the character and influence of the man were, and how he gained his effects. Much, both favorable and unfavorable, has been written of the quality of Dickens' humor, less about his satire, and a large amount of critical opinion attempts to establish his place as an educator and reformer. A few critics, notably George Gissing and G.K. Chesterton, have related Dickens' humor and satire with his work

as a reformer. By his friends he has been praised as a strong, constructive optimist; from others he has won disapproval as a confimed and dangerous sentimentalist. Before proceeding to the particular subject of this thesis, it might be well to glance over some relevant gleanings of what critics of yesterday and to-day have said about Dickens, - and as it were, bound the periphery of the circle before we explore the center.

Let us turn first to an observation of the less-favorable critics. I believe that, almost without exception, they all recognize at least one outstanding feature of Dickens :his humor. They perceive it, indeed, but often they see nothing else. Brander Matthews and John Burroughs, both Americans of note, express the extreme of criticism in this direction. Professor Matthews is very pointed: "Dickens was a humorist and nothing else." [1] John Burroughs follows in the same strain: "A man of wonderful talents, but of no deep seriousness; a matchless mimic through and through, and nothing else." [2] There seems to be no connection with even distant ethical values here. Other critics of similar mind inevitably enjoy the humor of Dickens but regret that there is little in it save an exuberance of animal spirits and a boyish superabundance of vitality. [3] Mr.

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[3] Davey, Samuel, "Darwin, Carlyle, and Dickens, and Other Essays." Cited in ibid., p. 587. Dawson, W.G., "Quest and Vision," (1886), Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 589.

[2] Burroughs, John, "On the Rereading of Books", Century Magazine, vol. 55 (1897), p. 149. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 592.

[1] Matthews, Brander, "Aspects of Fiction" (1894-1902), p. 47. Cited in Moulton's Library of Literary Criticism, vol. 6, p. 592.

Herman Merivale, comparing Dickens and Thackeray, says, "Thackeray was the mighty master of that kind of humor whose brightest laughter has a touch of tears - Dickens was the master of its other side, which turns straight to the fun-god, and suffereth not its god to be eclipsed." [1]

It is Dickens' display of his keen sense of humor which brings him face to face with one of the most frequently reiterated charges against him. It is that very sense of the ridiculous which leads him to emphasize humorous peculiarities , and lays him open to the accusation of creating not characters, but caricatures. They are said to be not men and women but mere lively representations of some dominant eccentricity, conceived in the manner of Jonson's 'humours', rather than as individual personalities.[2] If it be a fact that the characters of his books do not impress us with their realism, in one way or another, they could, of course, hardly have a lasting effect upon the reader, ethical or otherwise. One critic [3] calls Bumble, Pecksniff, Mrs. Gamp, and other figures which perhaps border on caricature, 'standards of reference', which stand for character, though not for persons. Mr. George Brimley admits that "many of his portraits excite pity, and suggest the

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[3] Lewin, Walter, "The Abuse of Fiction". The Forum, vol. 7 (1889), p. 668. Cited in ibid.. p. 590.

[2] Brimley, George, "Bleak House", Essays, ed. Clark (1853 - 1858), p. 292. Cited in ibid., p. 582. Walker, Hugh, "The Age of Tennyson" (1897), p. 87. Cited in ibid., p. 593.

[1] Merivale, Herman, "About Two Great Novelists", Temple Bar, vol. 83 (1888), p. 202. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 590.

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existence of crying social sins, but of almost all we are obliged to say that they border on, and frequently reach caricature, of which the essence is to catch a striking likeness by exclusively selecting and exaggerating a peculiarity that marks the man but does not represent him." [1] None other a critic than Ruskin, however, warns against losing the essential truth of Dickens because the reader feels that caricature has destroyed verity and realism. He holds that there is truth at the center, which should not be overlooked. "The caricature, though often gross, is never mistaken. Allow for manners,and the things he tells are true. Let us not lose the use of Dickens' wit and insight because he choses to speak in a circle of stage fire." [2]

Pursuing further this criticism of Dickens' realism or truth to life, one observes that it may be approached from about three more different viewpoints. One of these is a favorite reproach brought forward by the opposition to the effect that Dickens never created a real gentleman; that his satiric portraits of the nobility were reflected wholly from his own imagination and a temperamental, vague grudge against the pride and power of the upper classes. He is unfavorably compared with Thackeray, and probably rightly so, if one looks for a true, consistently lifelike picture of titled ' ladies and gentlemen '. Even Swinburne, one of the most devoted of Dickens' admirers, acknowledges that his idol is at his weakest in his social satire, especially in

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[1] Brimley, George, "Bleak House", Essays,ed. Clark (1853-1858), p.292. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 582.
[2] Ruskin, John, "The Roots of Honor",Unto This Last (1860), Edition, George Allen (1906), note, p. 14.

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his portrayal of the formalities and externals of the life of the nobility, but asserts that despite this fault , Dickens' satire of social pretensions and sham gentility is typical and true of the time.[1] Adolphus W. Ward, likewise a friendly critic, who is nevertheless not blind to the short-comings of Dickens, takes a unique position, in some points analogous to Swinburne's. "I demur to the common assertion that Dickens could not draw a real gentleman. All that can be said is that it very rarely suited his purpose to do so, supposing the term to include manners as well as feelings and actions..... Moreover, a closer examination of Lord Verisopht and Cousin Feenix will show that, gull as the one, and ninny as the other is, neither has anything that can be called ungentlemanly about him. On the contrary, the characters on the whole rather plead in favor of the advantage than the uselessness of blue blood. As for Dickens' other noblemen, they are nearly all mere passing embodiments of satirical fancies, which pretend to be nothing more."[2] Of course there is more or less quibbling about the term 'gentleman' - some of the eager Dickensians [3] claiming that Dickens has given us many real gentlemen, the gentlemen of native worth, rather than those who bear the name vicariously by reason of their station in life. This appears to me to be somewhat beside the point, because, although it is true that Captain Cut-

[3] Especially Walters, J. Cuming, "Phases of Dickens" (1911), p. 122.

[2] Ward, Adolphus W., "Charles Dickens", English Men of Letters, v. 9 (1901), p. 220.

[1] Swinburne, Algernon Charles, "Charles Dickens" (1902), pp.41, 42.

tle, Mr. Grewgious, and many others of 'nature's noblemen' are real gentlemen, it is mainly in the restricted meaning of the word that Dickens is attacked.

Another criticism frequently advanced is that Dickens is the opposite of all realism. He is called the 'cheeriest of humorists', but an idealist and a dreamer, hopelessly provincial, touching everything into magic by his imagination. "He found in the great city, not Cockneydom, but Fairyland, and he was never tired of wondering at its piteous oddity and delightful quiddity."[1] Dickens was part idealist and part dreamer, it is true, but it is a mistake to disparage the other side of his nature: of intense penetration and action. According to Chesterton, he saw the common-place so clearly that he could idealize it and yet make it seem more real than reality itself. [2] Mr. Merivale, who entertains an opinion similar to the first , that Dickens' creations "are imaginations as much as Puck or Ariel", makes the point that "Dickens' characters are either black or white, - Thackeray's are the gray mixture",[3] apparently having forgotten that Dickens created such characters as Pip or Rosa Bud or any number of others.

In his criticism, Merivale may have been suggesting a fault which George Eliot apprehended in the great novelist. It is not to be wondered at, that the author of the greatest Eng-

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[3] Merivale, Herman, "About Two Great Novelists", Temple Bar, vol. 83 (1888), p. 202. Cited in Moulton's Library, p. 590.
[2] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 47, 48.
[1] Buchanan, Robert, "The Coming Terror" (1891), p. 234. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6. p. 591.

lish psychological novels should have thought that Dickens was portraying only the surface of life. She felt that in so doing, he was losing an opportunity for real social service. She says: "If he could give us their psychological character, their conceptions of life, and their emotions, with the same truth as their idiom and manners, his books would be the greatest contribution Art has ever made to the awakening of social sympathies." [1] But 'his psychology was false', which springs from his philosophy of life. George Eliot censures the latter as being sentimental, and falsely and foolishly optimistic ( one of the most widely held criticisms of Dickens), and only redeemed by "the precious salt of his humor." She is opposed to "the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want, or that the working classes are in a condition to enter at once into a millennial state of altruism, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else, and no one is caring for himself." [2] This is very sound criticism, but I think deals too harshly with a tendency, and not an obsession of Dickens. Mr. Paul Elmer More also comments upon the externality of Dickens' characters - that they are described from without and not from within, and makes the statement that the emotions the reader feels in reading of the characters, are not the feelings which the charact-

[2] Eliot, George, "The Natural History of German Life", Westminster Review (1856). Reprinted in George Eliot's Essays, Dana Estes and Co., (1883), p. 162.

[1] Eliot, George, "The Natural History of German Life", Westminster Review (1856). Reprinted in George Eliot's Essays, Dana Estes and Co., (1883), p. 161.

ers themselves would experience, but those which Dickens, "the great, egotistic, dramatic observer" felt as he created them.

In brief, these criticisms find fault with Dickens' realism on the three-fold accusation that his social satire was weak and untrue, so that he never portrayed a real gentleman; that his creations are all the offspring of his imagination, and are purely ideal; and lastly that his characters are conceived from the outside only, and are not pictured with any psychological truth or accuracy.

Among the more or less adverse criticisms of Dickens ' work, there is none more surprising, when compared with the opinion of favorable critics, than that of Charles D. Yonge. He concedes that Dickens wrote 'with invariable purity', and never attempted the 'most distant suggestion of impropriety'- (which, when one reads what follows, is indeed "damming with faint praise"): "For", continues Mr. Yonge, "it is probably rather overstraining his merits when he is further represented as having deliberately designed to bring about a reform of abuses by his writings... He never once attempted to delineate either man or woman the contemplation of whose character can refine or elevate the feelings of the reader; he does indeed on more than one occasion endeavor to be pathetic, but his talents were not formed to draw tears. His sense of fun is visible through his mask of dolefulness, and the effect he produces on the reader is certainly not that which he appears

to desire."[1] This quite takes one's breath away, especially when it is placed beside something like this: "Was Dickens consciously and intentionally an educator ? The prefaces to his novels, the preface to his Household Words; the educational articles he wrote; the prominence given in his books to child training in homes, institutions and schools; the statements of the highest educational philosophy found in his writings; and especially the clearness of his insight, and the profoundness of his educational thought, as shown by his condemnation of the wrong and his appreciation of the right in teaching and training the child, prove beyond question that he was not only broad and true in his sympathy with childhood, but that he was a progressive student of the fundamental principles of education."[2] And Mr. Yonge's attitude is again flatly contradicted by W. Walter Crotch, in his book "Charles Dickens, Social Reformer." He says, "Furthermore, it seems to me important to emphasize the fact that Charles Dickens was in a very special sense a social reformer. It was not simply that he loathed shams. With him it was not merely a case of creating characters at which the whole world laughed, humbugs who excited its wrath and impostors who provoked its derision. He was at heart and by conviction a reformer."[3] If the critic has found no man or woman whose character he can contemplate for the refining or elevat-

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[3] Crotch, W. Walter, "Charles Dickens, Social Reformer" (1913), Intro., p. vii.

[2] Hughes, James L., "Dickens as an Educator" ( 1903), p. 1.

[1] Yonge, Charles D., "Three Centuries of English Literature" (1872), pp. 625-626. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6,p. 586.

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ing of his feelings, he must have read Dickens for naught. Perhaps Mrs. Gamp would not refine him nor Pecksniff elevate him, but if he is ashamed to 'contemplate' Joe Gargery, or Biddy, or Ruth Pinch, if his heart is never warmed by John Jarndyce, even if the 'wind is in the west' sometimes, if he has the attitude of a MacStinger toward Captain Cuttle,- then assuredly he will see no purpose in Dickens, nor the accomplishment of any purpose. Mr. J. Cuming Walters, whose viewpoint is totally different from that of Mr. Yonge, describes Dickens' favorite type of "little" women as 'serviceable women' - "the embodiments of a beautiful idea, and in their lovely guise, they themselves become beautiful..... They have no superfluous embellishments, but they are eminently likeable, they are real and near, and they are intrinsically great "little " women who consecrate human relationships." [1] And of the memorable characters among his men - some of 'nature's noblemen', he says, "They form part of a vision of noble manhood, of untainted nature, good creatures as God fashioned them......... Gentlemen, modest and exalted. Heroes, not of high adventure, but of sterling worth, innate goodness, heroes not handsome, save in deeds that make them so." [2]

From a consideration of the unfavorable criticisms which have gone before, one may see that an opinion founded upon them would give little or no credit to Dickens' humor or

[2] Ibid., p. 121-122.

[1] Walters, J. Cuming, "Phases of Dickens" (1911), pp. 159,160.

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satire as a source of ethical value or influence, - Dickens is said to be only a clever mimic with no purpose beyond his humor; his characters have descended into caricatures, picturing a peculiarity but not a personality; his satire is unreal and unjust; he is an idealist and a dreamer, and shows only one side of life, the good or the bad, he makes no attempt at psychological analysis of character, and shows only external traits; his philosophy of life is false and sentimental; and he never wrote with deliberate purpose, nor achieved any result to elevate or refine the reader.

If unfavorable critics have laid more emphasis upon what they conceive to be the undesirable traits of Dickens and have had less to say about his influence, his champions speak of his traits only to identify them with his dynamic power. Dickens' influence has been very wide, and the partial explanation lies in the universality of his appeal. "In everybody," says Chesterton, "there is a certain thing that loves babies, that fears death, that likes sunlight: that thing enjoys Dickens." [1] Dickens has not made himself one with the joys and sorrows of only a few Londoners, but with the sympathies of humanity. His stage is as broad as London, yet as vast as the world. He did not 'write down' to his public, but wrote with them and for them. He came close to the heart of the common people - "No English author has come so close to the hearts of the people as Charles Dickens... Dickens is always near and intimate. He is

[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), p. 109.

the friend speaking direct, needing no intermediary, requiring no interpreter; we understand his words and are moved by his message; he has the power of appeal, and is a man, always a man in contact with his brother-man."[1] It was by winning the friendship of the common people that he was able to mould them to his purpose. W. Walter Crotch, an enthusiastic critic who stresses the dynamic side of Dickens, says: "The fact is, that Dickens accomplished what to many is profoundly difficult. He saw the life of his time as a whole, and he perceived that the true prophet and teacher could become an influence of effective progress only so long as he could arrest and harness the interest and fealty of the common people. The great men may conceive great thoughts and ideas, but their value and effectiveness lie with the man who realizes them."[2] The common mind could more readily grasp 'a conventional morality and a simple psychology', and when these were joined to Dickens' unusually buoyant and happy spirits, there were few people who could fail to perceive his meaning.[3] "The fun and the joy, the kindliness, the sympathy, that poured from his books, blend in a perennial stream of the pleasantest recreation for countless men and women."[3]

That note of 'sweetness and light' is struck again and again wherever lovers of Dickens express their opinions of him.

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[3] Helm, W.H., ed. Introduction to "Charles Dickens" (1912), p. xxxix.

[2] Crotch, W.Walter, "The Soul of Dickens" (1916),p. 219.

[1] Walters, J. Cuming, "Phases of Dickens" (1911), p. 4.

Charles Eliot Norton pays a pleasant tribute to this quality of the author: "To give so much pleasure, to add so much to the happiness of the world, by his writings, as Mr. Dickens has succeeded in doing, is a felicity that has never been attained in such full measure by any other author.... Indeed, it is not in his truly literary character that he has done most for us, it is as a man of the largest humanity, who has simply used literature as a means by which to bring himself into relation with his fellow-men, and to inspire them with something of his own sweetness, kindness, charity and good-will." [1] Dickens' geniality and humor joyfully overflows into his books, and by its genuine magic irresistibly calls the reader to share in its golden warmth. Swinburne's praise is of a rhapsodic strain: "We acknowledge with infinite thanksgiving of inexhaustible laughter and of rapturous admiration, the very greatest comic poet or creator that ever lived to make the life of other men more bright and more glad and more perfect, than ever - without his beneficent influence, it possibly or imaginably could have been." [2]

According to many critics some of Dickens' best work, which has so much of humor and yet so much of kindness in it, is that in which he draws characters - whose exteriors are not particularly attractive, or even may be obviously peculiar - with such penetration and affection, that the reader could not be a snob

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[2] Swinburne, Algernon Charles, "Charles Dickens" (1902), pp.28, 29.

[1] Norton, Charles Eliot, "Charles Dickens", North American Review, vol. 106 (1886), p. 671. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 584.

if he tried, and finds himself loving them with their author. "Choosing some character of the most unpromising outward appearance.. he makes us love them all, for the truth, the honesty, the sweet, guileless, forgiving spirit that lives within the ungainly frame. If Dickens had done no more than create the Tom Pinch of "Chuzzlewit", or the blacksmith Joe of "Great Expectations", he deserves lasting gratitude and fame." [1] Mr. G. K. Chesterton, whose criticisms of Dickens are always vital and memorable, points out that the real work of Dickens was the revealing of a certain grotesque greatness inside an obscure or even unattractive type - which illuminates, as he says, the paradox of all spiritual things, that the inside is always larger than the outside. [2]

George Gissing makes the observation that the reason Dickens could gain the influence he did, was that he first got the public heart and conscience in accord with him by his humor and wide sympathy with their ideas and ideals, and then when they loved, laughed and wept with him, he could move them to his will. For Dickens was not only an apostle of sweetness and light, he was a veritable light-bringer. Mr. Yonge to the contrary, there is both internal and external evidence to show that Dickens practically always wrote with a purpose, and that was the betterment of social conditions. Mr. W. Walter Crotch, who has written two books[3] of the highest eulogy to prove that Dickens was

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[3] Crotch, W. Walter, "Charles Dickens, Social Reformer" (1913); "The Soul of Dickens" (1916) .

[2] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), p. 260.

[1] Collier, W.F., "History of English Literature" (1861), p. 484. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, pp. 583-584.

the greatest vital force of his generation, says that Dickens' best work was always written with a purpose, and that his highest humor and most deliberate purpose often go together. [1] Gissing and other critics maintain that Dickens was never so happy as when writing a story with an obvious moral, and that it is a duty from which he never departs. He was the first to use fiction to tell the sad history of the poor and wretched who live in the dark byways of a great city, and to show that their condition proves the neglect of a social duty.[2] Not only did Dickens expose abuses, and write with a purpose to ameliorate evil conditions, but he was in a very large degree successful. His most enthusiastic admirers conceive him to be a sort of divinity who said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Mr. Crotch calls him "the most potent liberating force that the 19th. century has produced," [3] and Mr. James L. Hughes in his book "Dickens as an Educator", says that "Dickens was England's greatest educational reformer." [4] Frederick W. Farrar gives him this praise: "It is immensely to the credit of the heart of the novelist, and will be a permanent addition to his fame, not only that he devoted fiction to the high end of exposing manifold social abuses, but even that, by the force of his genius, he con-

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[4] Hughes, James L., "Dickens as an Educator" (1903), p. 1.
[3] Crotch, W.Walter, "The Soul of Dickens" (1916), p. 71.
[2] Irving, Walter, "Charles Dickens" (1874). Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 586.
[1] Crotch, W.Walter, "The Soul of Dickens" (1916), p. 75, 76.

tributed a material element to their correction."[1] And here also an unreserved championship of his good influence and of his philosophy: "No single man was ever so widely and permanently useful. No single man ever sowed gentleness and mercy with so broad a sweep... The new man says of Dickens that his sentiment rings false. This is a mistake. It rings old-fashioned. No false note ever moved a world, and the world continued to love his very name."[2]

Friendly criticism seems to be unanimous in its agreement that Dickens was a great moral influence, and it is equally agreed that through the help of humor and satire he achieved his results. His satire is considered at its best as keen and unmistakable, particularly when he attacks some great institutional evil, but his 'social' satire is criticized by nearly everyone on the grounds of being externally untrue to the class it satirizes. His satire is usually lightened and made more palatable by a touch of humor. He was often fierce in his attacks, says Chesterton, but this humor made the fierceness readable and so gained an audience and consequent results.[3] His great satirical attacks upon schools, workhouses, jails, and Red Tape in government and courts, have been recognized as contributing largely to the disappearance of the evils which they combatted. He was the humorist who was also a censor, combining fun with

[3] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), p. 134.
[2] Murray, D.W., "My Contemporaries in Fiction" (1897), pp. 10,13. Cited in ibid., p. 593.
[1] Farrar, Frederick W., "Men I Have Known" (1897), p. 265. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 593.

indignation, mixing his diatribe with ridicule.[1] His pure humor was not indulged in only for its own sake. Critics, knowing the temper of the man, have appreciated how frequently he uses his humor in his most earnest purposes. Albert S. G. Canning in his"Philosophy of Charles Dickens" recognizes the novelist's method of drawing attention to public wrongs by mingling terrible descriptions of misery and crime with very amusing sketches of life. [2] Through humor Dickens comes to seriousness. Gissing thus describes the psychological reaction of the reader: "After the merriment comes the thought, 'but what a shame! ' ", and adds that true humor always suggests a thought, or throws light upon human nature. [3] Mr. G. K. Chesterton also maintains that Dickens can only get at solemn emotion through the grotesque or humorous. "Dickens had to make a character humorous before he could make it human. It was the only way he knew, and he ought always to have adhered to it. Of the things he tried to treat unsmilingly or grandly, we can all make game to our hearts' content, but when once he has laughed at a thing, it is sacred forever." [4]

It is clear that two things especially stand out in these criticisms of Dickens. (1) He is believed to have been a potent influence for social happiness and betterment, and (2) he purposefully used his gifts of humor and satire to emphasize the

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[4] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), p. 192.
[3] Gissing, George., "Charles Dickens" (1912), pp. 220-221.
[2] Canning, Albert S.G., "The Philosophy of Charles Dickens" (1880), p. 335. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. 6, p. 587.
[1] Walters, J. Cuming, "Phases of Dickens" ( 1911), Intro.,p.xvi.

evils which to his mind should be reformed.

It is now in place to consider just how far the preceeding discussions of criticism contribute to the subject of the following chapters. Needless to say, the unfavorable opinions of Dickens ' work, if assented to, by their very nature discourage at the outset any attempt to discover ethical values. If an author is classified as only a humorist, and not a realistic one at that, and the idea of his having any sane or serious attitude toward life is repudiated, one might come to the conclusion either that these critics believed Dickens had no ethical value, or that they did not even give such an apparently remote possibility a thought. It is by investigating to prove these views in the main unsound, by refuting them with reference to Dickens' own work, by challenging them with other criticisms which nore nearly approach the subject, that one can mount upon a firm basis to found new opinions. Many things have been written by many people, attempting to prove that Dickens had the earnest desire and purpose to make the world better, and that, moreover, he was a successful reformer. It has been shown again and again that Dickens won his way into peoples' hearts, and then when they laughed with him and loved him, he turned teacher. It is clear that some critics have seen that it was the very natural thing for Dickens to do - to choose to bring about his most cherished desires by the use of his finest gifts. Writers who have stressed Dickens' method of using his humor and satire, have come the nearest to an approximation of his ethical value. From their description of the characteristics of his art, one may often

make the deduction that they in all likelihood believe him to have exerted an ethical influence, although they never resolve the question to this point. Walters, Crotch, Gissing, and Chesterton are foremost among those who offer a basis for the determination of the ethical value of Dickens' humor and satire. Gissing dwells on his method of approach, Walters and Crotch emphasize the dynamic character of his genius, and Chesterton does all this, and furthermore justifies his optimism and enthusiasm. Surely there is material here to furnish a beginning toward an investigation of the ethical values of Dickens' humor and satire. To base one's judgment of ethical value wholly and exclusively on the results accomplished by Dickens, or to draw one's inference entirely from an opinion of his philosophy of life, would appear to me to be an incomplete consideration of the matter. One must be prepared to look upon all sides of the question, and discover first what connotation shall be atta~~t~~ched to the word 'ethical', when it is to be applied as a touchstone to Dickens' humor and satire. If one grants, with the favorable critics, that he gained the love and support of the larger mass of the people to help change the world, that he won them with his humor and a~~r~~roused them with his satire, - if one asserts that in the use of these two instruments he had a serious purpose, the question still remains: was that purpose ethical, or was the philosophy of life which dictated that purpose, a false one ? Was he a man of benevolent and compelling personality who sincerely believed in a mistaken idea, and caused a multitude to follow him by the sheer force of his

genius, or was he after all, the wise, far-seeing ethical teacher, whose lessons were and still are a constructive, motive force in the world ?

## Chapter II

## DICKENS' PURPOSE AS A NOVELIST

### Definition of Terms

In a study of the ethical value of Dickens' humor and satire, our first step is to limit the field of action - to consider what is meant in general when one speaks of ethics or ethical values, and then to proceed to the particular problem as it relates itself to Dickens. Following the advice of Captain Cuttle to "overhaul the book", we find in the Century Dictionary this definition of ethical: "Relating to morals or the principles of morality; pertaining to right and wrong in the abstract or in conduct; pertaining or relating to ethics." And of ethical truth, - "The agreement of what is said to what is really believed; veracity." The Encyclopedia Brittanica [1] offers this on the subject of ethics: "Ethics, then, is usually confined to the particular field of human character and conduct so far as they depend or exhibit certain general principles commonly known as moral principles. Men in general characterize their own conduct , and that of other men, by such general adjectives as good, bad,right and wrong, and it is the meaning and scope of these adjectives , primarily in relation to human conduct, and ultimately in their final and absolute sense, that ethics investigates.... However complicated and involved its arguments and processes of inference may become, the facts from which they start, and the conclusions to which they point,are such as the moral consciousness alone can understand or warrant."

[1] Encyclopedia Brittanica, Eleventh Edition, vol. 9, p. 109.

From a careful reading of these definitions, one perceives that there are three lights in which ethical values may be judged: in human character and conduct; in the absolute sense, relating ethics to some system of philosophy; and in the moral consciousness, which is probably not wholly alike in any two personalities, and which will be governed more or less by their prevailing philosophies of life. To arrive at any fair and adequate estimation of ethical values, we must take into account the three sides of the triangular definition. I do not mean to say that the triangle is necessarily equilateral, but it must of necessity have three sides. An interpretation of the ethical value of Dickens' humor and satire within these limits will include: a study of his purpose and method, and the influence they have had upon conduct; a survey of his philosophy of life to determine its ethical value; and a consideration of the ethical effect of his humor and satire upon the reader of his books. At the end of the first chapter three questions were raised as guides to the solution of the thesis problem: Was Dickens' purpose ethical ? Was the philosophy of life governing that purpose true or false ? And finally: Was he a wise ethical teacher ? The three-fold implication of the term 'ethical' figures in the discussion of the above questions - not always following the order given in the definition, but, I think, each part always showing itself clearly wherever it appears.

## Dickens' Purpose as a Novelist

From that which we know of Dickens, not only though his works, but through his thoughts and actions, and from the opinions of contemporaries and critics, we realize that he was a man of strong convictions and firm purpose. And because his was such a virile personality in itself, aside from that part of him which finds expression in his novels, we approach our problem through Dickens himself, and then proceed to his work,- moving from within outward. This brings us to a consideration of the first question: Was Dickens' purpose ethical ?

Unlike Ibsen, who was irritated by the attitude of people who sought for a moral lesson in his plays, and who declared that he wished merely to picture interesting phases of life, Dickens had an avowed didactic purpose, which he took pains to impress upon his readers not only in his novels, but in special prefaces to his books. In order to appreciate how unmistakably Dickens asserts his principles, we have only to refer to the prefaces of some of his novels. The preface to "Martin Chuzzlewit" (1843), launches into the subject without introduction:

> "My main object in this story was, to exhibit in a variety of aspects the commonest of all the vices; to show how selfishness propagates itself; and to what a grim giant it may grow from small beginnings." A paragraph or so further on, after an explanation of the character of Jonas Chuzzlewit, he continues: "I make this comment on the character and solicit the reader's attention to it in his or her consideration of the tale, because nothing is more common in real life, than a want of profitable reflection on the causes of many vices and crimes that awaken the general horror. What is substantially true of families in this respect, is true of a whole

> commonwealth. As we sow, we reap. Let the reader go into the children's side of any prison in England, or, I grieve to add, of many workhouses, and judge whether those are monsters who disgrace our streets, people our hulks and penitentiaries, and overcrowd our penal colonies , or are creatures whom we have deliberately suffered to be bred for misery and ruin." [1]

In the last sentence Dickens in his moral indignation goes even farther than reproaching the evil - he places the blame for it upon society.

In "Nicholas Nickleby" (1838-39), which makes its powerful attack upon the Yorkshire schools, he voices his contempt for the wretched conditions with a reformer's vehemence. He says:

> "Of the monstrous neglect of education in England, and the disregard of it by the State as a means of forming good or bad citizens, and miserable or happy men, this class of schools afforded a notable example...... These Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten in the whole ladder. Traders in the avarice, indifference, or imbecility of parents, and the helplessness of children; ignorant, sordid, brutal men, to whom few considerate persons would have entrusted the board and lodging of a horse or dog; they formed a worthy cornerstone of a structure, which, for absurdity and a magnificent, high-handed laissez-aller neglect, has rarely been exceeded in the world..... I was always curious about them - fell, long afterwards and at sundry times, into the way of hearing more about them - at last, having an audience, resolved to write about them." [2]

He goes on to tell how he made a special journey into Yorkshire in the cold winter weather to investigate conditions for himself.

In his prefatory remarks for "Oliver Twist" (1837-39), Dickens justifies himself vigorously in the light of his moral beliefs and purposes. Replying to a certain criticism of the story, he writes:

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[2] "Nicholas Nickleby", Preface.

[1] Dickens, Charles, "Martin Chuzzlewit," Preface, Harper and Brothers (1902). All references to Dickens' works are taken from the Harper edition (1902).

> "When I completed it, and put it forth in its present form, it was objected to on some high moral grounds in some high moral quarters. It was, it seemed, a coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London's population......
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> "I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil. I have always believed this to be a recognized and established truth, laid down by the greatest men the world has ever seen, constantly acted upon by the best and wisest natures, and confirmed by the reason and experience of every thinking mind. I saw no reason... why the dregs of life, so long as their speech does not offend the ear, should not serve the purpose of a moral, at least as well as its froth and cream...........
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> "What manner of life is that which is described in these pages, as the everyday existence of a thief ? What charms has it for the young and ill-disposed, what allurements for the most jolter-headed of juveniles ? ...... The cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease, the shabby rags that scarcely hold together; where are the attractions of these things ? Have they no lesson, and do they not whisper something beyond the little-regarded warning of an abstract moral precept ? .... For it was my attempt in my humble.... sphere to dim the false glitter surrounding something which really did exist, by showing it in its unattractive and repulsive truth." [1]

Like Shakespeare's Henry V, Dickens believes:

"There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out," [2]

for he reiterates in an address: "I was anxious to find in evil things that soul of goodness which the Creator has put in them. I was anxious to show that virtue may be found in the by-ways of the world, and that it is not incompatible with poverty or even with rags." With his full appreciation of the joy that could be got out of life, he felt "an earnest and humble desire to in-

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[2] Shakespeare, William, "Henry V," IV, 1,4.
[1] "Oliver Twist," Preface.

crease the stock of harmless cheerfulness."

In all these quotations of Dickens' own words, one feels the moral earnestness of the man, and the presence of a prominent purpose, which to his mind at least, was thoroughly ethical. And we who cannot doubt his whole-souled love of good and hatred of evil, nor minimize the potent energy - enthusiastic but not undirected - with which he entered upon his work as a reformer, cannot but grant him the sincere ethical nature of his purpose. Vigor and sincerity characterized all his efforts. In "David Copperfield" (1849-50), he says: "Whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well. What I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely. Never to put my hand to anything on which I could not throw my whole self, and never to affect depreciation of my work, I find now to have been one of my golden rules." The requirement of ethical truth as - "The agreement of what is said with what is believed" is fully met by Dickens. He held firmly to certain principles and expressed them in life and in his works. He believed in following the right because it was right, and not because it led to fortune. Forster comments that, "It will be remembered of him always that he desired to set right what was wrong, that he held no abuse to be unimprovable, that he left none of the evils exactly as he found them." [1] A sane view of Dickens the reformer is suggested by J. Cuming Walters : "I do

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[1] Forster, John, "Life of Charles Dickens" (n.d.), Ed. Chapman and Hall, p. 644.

not contend that Dickens was always right. I should prefer to say he was simply righteous. Both in regard to crime and poverty the feelings are dangerous guides... But of Dickens' exaltation of motive there is no question, and even when extremes led him astray he was not retrograde, but still marching onward, the good unconfused."[1]

Dickens, as has been seen, makes clear his moral purpose in general, although we do not find him specifically stating the particular purpose of his humor and satire. In the very books, however, in whose prefaces he most plainly declares his theme, he accomplishes the task he has set for himself, through the use of humor and satire. We may therefore feel encouraged to infer that he had an ethical purpose in his use of them. When we have assured ourselves that Dickens' purpose was ethical, it still remains to be decided whether his philosophy of life was false or constructive, and whether the methods and results of that purpose and that philosophy as expressed in his humor and satire were ethical in value. Our second point leads us into an inquiry of the philosophy of Dickens, which we must understand and judge before we may adequately discuss his method.

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[1] Walters, J. Cuming, "Phases of Dickens" (1911), p. 183.

## Chapter III

## DICKENS' PHILOSOPHY AS A NOVELIST

One of the chief charges brought against Dickens as an ethical teacher has always been that he displays in his books a so-called sentimental attitude toward human nature. There are four aspects of this charge which especially merit our attention: Dickens is said to tend toward giving his readers a false picture of society, in which goodness and purity of heart are the peculiar possession of the poor; [1] to have attempted reform on the basis of the false philosophy that benevolence and good cheer can cure all social ills; [2] to have created only 'black and white' characters, and not the normal 'grey mixture' of everyday life; [3] and to exemplify the ultra-optimistic doctrine that the good always receive their reward on earth, while the wicked come to destruction. [4] A bird's-eye view of his work might perhaps give the reader an impression such as the preceding comments suggest, but if one comes only a little nearer to Dickens, one sees that these conceptions usually exist in the mind of the reader and not of the writer.

It is characteristic of the sentimentalist to believe in the predominant goodness of human nature, to be wilfully blind

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[4] Bernbaum, Ernest, Lectures on Dickens, English 52.

[3] Merivale, Herman, "About Two Great Novelists," Temple Bar, vol. 83 (1888), p. 202. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol.6, p.590.

[2] Eliot , George, "The Natural History of German Life," Westminster Review (1856). Reprinted in George Eliot's Essays, Dana Estes and Co. (1883), p. 161.

[1] Bernbaum, Ernest, Lectures on Dickens, English 52.

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to the evil side of life, and to trust to love as a panacea for all the diseases of society. The experiences of Dickens' early youth were not of a kind to give him such a rosy outlook upon life. With his father in a debtors' prison, his family struggling with poverty, the frail, sensitive child was forced to help earn a scanty subsistence by working in a blacking factory. It was a time of suffering for him, and the sad experiences of his boyhood left an indelible imprint upon his spirit. He had endured poverty, had seen the wrong done by the stringent laws against debtors; he knew the horrors of the prison system, and had felt the suffering caused by child labor - and his personal acquaintance with many of the social evils of his time made his later satire of them the more fervent and compelling. Dickens learned that life had its evil and its tragedy, and he became aware that love unaided could not accomplish reform. But with all his consciousness of wrong and sorrow, he was blest with a precious gift of humor and a hopeful joy in life which gave him courage to see the light in every present darkness and the dawn at the end of every night. This latter side of the author has sometimes been overstressed at the expense of the former, and so people have made the mistake of thinking of Dickens as only one of a long line of sentimental optimists.

It may no doubt be true that the childhood unhappiness of Dickens gave him a sympathy with the poor which he might not otherwise have felt so keenly, and it may even have caused in him a sort of unconscious bitterness toward the rich and power-

ful. However this may be, we never find him cynical, nor so unfair as to impute an evil to a member of a class merely because the latter belongs to that particular social group, but we see him rather exposing evils in every class, wherever he sees a condition of things which needs improvement. To Dickens, wrong was wrong wherever it appeared - be it among the lower, middle, or upper classes. To be sure, he gives us a Lord Verisopht, but on the opposite side there appear Bill Sykes and Fagin; and Sampson and Sally Brass, Mr. Pecksniff, Uriah Heep, and John Jaspar, although they are all members of the middle class to which Dickens himself belonged, are just as mercilessly exposed in their wrongdoing as is any character of the nobility. If happiness and goodness reign in the poor homes of the Cratchits, or the Toodles, or the Peggottys, one must not forget the misery of the wretched families in "Bleak House", to whom Esther ministered, the squalid life of the poor in the debtors' prison of "Pickwick", or the pictures of low London life in "Oliver Twist". If Dickens portrayed the evils of the poor with more sympathy than those of the rich, that appears to me to be an indication not of sentimentalism, but an appreciation of the fact that poverty and misery form a fit soil for the propagation of temptation and crime, and that it is the place of the more fortunate to realize that their own increased advantages and opportunities should make it a duty to remember "noblesse oblige". Dickens' aristocracy is always one of merit, never merely one of position, but it does not therefore follow that he would deny that true nobility could be found among the wealthy or titled classes. Some of the rich who are good and

benevolent, and who realize their debt to society, are among Dickens' best-loved characters. Who would believe that their creator did not rejoice to bring forth such creations as generous and considerate John Jarndyce, the jovial Cheerybles, Pickwick, "an angel in gaiters", and old Scrooge, reformed and overflowing with kindness and good-will: - rich men who will surely enter the kingdom of Heaven without passing through the eye of a needle. The very fact that Dickens does portray these men shows that he does not condemn the rich classes because they are rich, but because they misuse their wealth and advantages. It is true that he was more at home among scenes of simple goodness and joy, and that he interprets these with a special affection and understanding. He was always sincere and earnest in other delineations, but was not so invariably successful because he understood them less fully. His attitude, however, was not false, nor dictated by the sentimental philosophy that goodness resided in the humble heart and wickedness lurked in the abodes of the wealthy classes.

Although I have tried to make clear that Dickens did not portray life from a one-sided point of view, the fact remains that he did emphasize the happiness and virtue in lowly lives. Before we reproach him as sentimental, in order to understand why he did this we should take at least a swift panoramic view of the conditions that existed in England in his time. It was said to be an age of sham gentility, when conventionality and hypocrisy veiled a widely-spread shallowness of sympathy and art-

ificiality of ideals.[1] An affected gravity and sanctimonious pessimism characterized a large number of the people.[2] Snobbery was a prevalent sin. Aristocracy in the best sense of the word was passing, and the power was being transferred to the middle class, which was predominantly practical-minded and fiercely egoistic.[3] It is not surprising that in an age like this the poor should have been misunderstood and mistreated, and that crime should have walked abroad.[4] But with all the darkness and evil of the times, there was,(as Chesterton particularly points out) an undercurrent of intense, surging vitality - an enthusiasm and a movement toward democratic liberality which had tided over from the French revolution.[5] Dickens possessed in extraordinary degree this latter trait of dynamic enthusiasm and hopeful democracy, and because he felt the impulse so strongly, he felt all the more the great need to make this optimistic humanitarianism prevalent. In any age the majority are more prone to see the good in congenial and attractive surroundings than in an obscure and wretched environment, and in Dickens' time when social pretensions were taking too large a place in peoples' minds, there was particular need that the sorrows of the poor be brought to light, and furthermore that their good qualities be

[5] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 5-8.
[4] Crotch, Walter, "The Soul of Dickens" (1916), p. 5.
[3] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), pp. 9, 10.
[2] Saunders, Margaret Baillie, "The Philosophy of Dickens" (1905), pp. 28, 29.
[1] Walters, J.C., "Phases of Dickens" (1911), Introduction, pp. xviii, xix, xx.

stressed so that the public could be awakened to the fact that reform was not hopeless, but of vital importance to people in whom hope had not yet died. Dickens called attention to goodness and evil regardless of class, but if we find him particularly interested in the poor, we should remember that he was a reformer in purpose, and saw that, to correct an evil, he must bring the submerged truth into the glare, not only of the daylight, but of the limelight. His natural tendencies and his experience peculiarly fitted him for the work, but he also understood clearly his purpose and his course. It was not a vague, sentimental affection for the 'under-dog', not a blindly directed, constitutional opposition to class that led Dickens on the path he followed.

Let us now consider whether or not Dickens is a reformer who makes love the perfect panacea for all social sickness. When one reads him extensively, especially his best humorous passages, one becomes filled with a sense of ebullient joy and an all- embracing benevolence. Many of the unfortunates in his books are made happy again through affection and sympathy, and his best-loved characters are always bounteous in their distribution of the milk of human kindness. But Dickens, although he devoutly believed that the second and great commandment, if earnestly followed by men, would solve many social difficulties, was not so optimistic as to suppose that fraternal love was a cure-all. Mr. Scrooge, when he becomes regenerated by the Christmas spirit , brings happiness into many lives: why should he not, when he had previously been the chief cause of their unhappiness ? On the

other hand, unintelligent, unlimited good-feeling is not advocated by Dickens, for Mrs.Jellyby, with her impractical and visonary philanthropy is vividly satirized by him. We see in Esther Summerson a cooperation of love with skill, and yet even she cannot bring more than a temporary brightness into the lives of the poor brickmakers in "Bleak House". Mr. Pickwick in the Fleet does much good, but when he goes away, the wretched people live on in their squalor and misery. Dickens knew that love was a necessary part , but not the whole of reform. What the whole of it was, perhaps he never fully appreciated, for his chief work was in preparing the way for others to make social revolutions.

When we look more closely into his work, we begin to see that Dickens' purpose in his novels was not so much to lay out a definite platform of reform, as it was to call attention to the things which needed improvement, and to foster a spirit of sympathy and kindliness through which people should be inspired to alleviate suffering and wrong. In none of his novels, however vehemently he attacks abuses, does he outline a scheme of reform to right the wrongs he has so clearly set forth. Chancery robbed Miss Flite of her sanity, destroyed the life of Richard Carstone and the happiness of his family, and cast its shadow over many other homes. When we finish reading the book, we feel the ruthless power of this juggernaut of the law, our 'pity and terror' have been awakened, but, for all we learn from Dickens, the same relentless force goes on and will still go on unless society takes the matter in hand. He makes clear that Bumbledom has been a curse to childhood, but he gives the world no theory as to how

the evil system is to be rooted out. It is true that Dickens makes much of the virtue of benevolence, and when one sees how he rejoices in the narration of the deeds of his 'good fairies' one is inclined to feel - as perhaps the author himself did - 'how quickly the millennium would come if everyone did his neighborly duty by everyone else' ! And so it would - But Dickens was too keen an observer of life not to realize that everyone didn't, and he tried to show what happened when men failed to meet their obligations. He pictured the squalor, the sickness and wretchedness of the poor, the inconsiderate pride and isolation of the rich, the selfishness and sly malice of unscrupulous lawyers, the misery and degradation of prisoners. But in all the welter of unhappiness and crime, he never failed to bring a gleam of hope for better things. He was aware that the majority of persons are not moved to action by an unbroken contemplation of the gloomy side of life. The best reformer must feel that there is hope for reform. He must hate the evil, but must try to understand what causes it in the evil-doer, and attempt to sympathize with its victim. So, through the dark scenes in Dickens' books, move the well-known and well-loved characters of light, who in their small way, ameliorate, but do not banish evil, and who, by the undeniably helpful spirit of their service, remind the reader that after all, "now abideth faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love."

From a study of the purpose of his novels, we may say that Dickens rather exposes evils than prescribes remedies for them. Knowing the predominant optimism of his philosophy, it

may be just as well that he was more a diagnostician than a social surgeon, for if he had been the latter, his plans of reform might have been outgrown with changing ideals of social service. As it is, he pointed out the abuses, and they stand unmasked for the world to challenge. His mission was the discovery of the disease, and he practiced a kind of mental suggestion upon his patients in order to give them the proper attitude for overcoming their ills. W. H. Helm, in his introduction to a volume of selections from Dickens, makes this comment: "We have not to criticize in detail those philanthropic efforts of Dickens, we have to remember that they were earnest, and that he helped to expose grave abuses which began to shrivel in the glare of publicity. He was not a mere destroyer of evil. Much of the seed he sowed in the social field was sound, and brought forth good fruit. If at the present moment there are thousands of people speaking and writing phrases of Dickens without the least consciousness of the source of their words, there are also thousands projecting or doing kindly acts for the bettering of private or public matters, whose minds are working in a sequence of thought which came from the words of Dickens, and may have originated there." [1]

Dickens' doctrine of affectionate sympathy was not a solution of the social problem, but a part of a foundation upon which a solution could be built - a solution which he did not think out to its completion. It seems to me that his mission will not appear to have been misguided, unless we impute to him

[1] Helm, W. H., Introduction to "Charles Dickens" (1912), p.xvii.

a larger task than he himself set out to perform. He laid legitimate emphasis on the things which advanced his purpose, limited though it was, and because he had a wonderful power within these limits, he was eminently successful. J. C. Walters sums up this aspect of Dickens' work so well that I shall quote his words somewhat at length. He calls Dickens a 'soldier, not a scientist', and continues: "Once more it should be said that critic, reformer, patriot as he was, it does not necessarily follow that he had a precise science to expound, or that he fully understood every phase of the subject wherein he saw there was need of redress. He was rather the exposer of evils than the mender; he indicated where faults lay, and he reproached those who were responsible; he marked the course of a disease, but did not offer himself as the physician who could cure it. He was humanitarian by temperament, and perhaps he possessed more pity than practical politics. But that is not to his discredit. We must have the preacher to exhort as well as the practitioner to prescribe. Dickens supplied inspiration - that was no mean part of his mission." [1]

The criticism that the characters in the novels are either 'black or white' may, I think, be disposed of quite rapidly. Surely anyone who has read at all widely in Dickens has become aware of the fact that such a statement is one of unwarranted generality. It implies that one meets in Dickens-land only sweet young things, perfect paragons, or vile villains, whose inaccess-

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[1] Walters, J. C., "Phases of Dickens " (1911), p. 270.

ibility and elevation ( or corresponding degradation) from the common level of life would render them incapable of holding the reader's respect or interest, and so would be devoid of influence. There is no need to deny that one does find these extreme types of blackness and whiteness in Dickens, but they are not so much in the majority that one should feel at all justified in branding all his characters with that trademark. What of Pip, with his vacillations between conscience and selfish desire; Miss Tox, with her little, affected ways and too abject humility for Mr. Dombey - traits which for a while almost prevent us from appreciating her real kindness of heart; Richard Carstone with his frank, attractive boyishness, clouded by one fatal obsession; Dick Swiveller, carefree and careless, but showing himself capable of deeper seriousness and kindliness; Sidney Carton, a weak young good-for-nothing rising through love to the height of nobility in sacrifice; and Nancy, the girl of the streets, with her grievous errors of life, redeemed by some remnants of unselfishness and affection; - are these figures (only a few of many which might be mentioned) not of the desired 'gray mixture' ? And the characters of Dickens who are most delightfully famous as exponents of good cheer need not run the risk of being classed with the sentimental heroes and heroines - the 'glad girls and boys' of the " O be joyful" books. Those of Dickens are usually not perfect either in beauty or disposition, but are loveably queer and charmingly odd. They do not revolutionize society by the magnetic force of their personality, nor do they win the love of everyone within the wide radius of their influence - powers so

generally possessed in the fiction of sentimentalism. Indeed, in the preface to "Oliver Twist", Dickens states clearly his understanding of the dual nature of hman personality - a belief strongly held by the humanists. In justifying the elements of good in the depraved character of Nancy, he syas: "It is emphatically God's truth, for it is the truth he leaves in such depraved and miserable breasts; the hope yet lingering behind; the last fair drop of water at the bottom of the dried-up, weed-choked well. It involves the best and worst shades of our common nature; much of its ugliest hues, and something of its most beautiful; it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth."

In the sentimentalist's world, the good are always rewarded and the wicked receive their deserts of an opposite kind. Dickens had the type of mind which, delighting in goodness and happiness, was vigorously opposed to all evil, and so it is not unnatural to find him, in the endings of his books, pretty liberally handing out the crowns of glory, or laying about him with the chastising rod. One can hardly justify the incredibly optimistic final tableaux of his novels, but one may attempt to understand or explain them. Dickens had an implicit trust in the ultimate triumph of good over evil - a faith not in itself sentimental, but wholesomely Christian. His attitude as a teacher could have been expressed in the very words of Christ: "It is impossible but that stumbling should come; but woe unto him through whom they come! It were well for him if a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and he were thrown into the sea,

rather than he should cause one of these little ones to stumble." [1] Religion and the general experience of the world encourage us to hope that there is truth in the words, "the wrong shall fail, the right prevail" - at least ultimate truth, although we ourselves may not always live to see its accomplishment. The righteous may have at least a mental and spiritual peace in this world, and the wicked, never secure in their happiness, suffer retribution in some manner, even if it be not in material ways. The fault of Dickens was that his enthusiastic optimism condensed this universal truth - which often requires a lifetime or generations to fulfill itself - into the compass of a book. Thus the endings of his novels are too frequently unnatural, and close the story like a fairy-tale. Joyous coincidences are as bound to happen in life as the less fortunate happenings, but Dickens is apt to finish his books just about the time when these happy dispensations occur, and it is strange to contemplate how they materialize all at once, and how all the good people rejoice in a general jubilee, while the evil- doers writhe in the toils of their misdeeds. Exceptions may of course be found to the strict rule of poetic justice, but they are very evidently exceptions in the case of Dickens: Tom Pinch never gains the girl he loves, but he is not unhappy, for he has Ruth to love and help him; the Bumbles are not publicly denounced, but one knows that their fortunes are on the wane and that Mr. Brownlow and all good people heartily disapprove of

[1] Luke 17: 2.

them; Sairy Gamp is not justly dispatched from the face of the earth, but continues to take her "little sip of liquor if she is so disposed" although we feel sure that her professional services will be required less and less, and that some fine day she will come too near the Old Bailey and someone will furnish incriminating evidence against her. Usually, however, the moral is too obviously drawn. Perhaps Dickens felt that for his simple audience it was necessary to have poetic justice done so that they would unmistakably understand his lesson; perhaps his joy in playing the part of supreme arbiter at the bar for his own creations led him to do it, but it is nevertheless true that the development of the characters in his stories should have been sufficiently obvious so as to be morally effective without the necessity of grab-bag endings. And such was indeed the case, although Dickens did not appear to recognize it, and thus his novels, with their continuous humor and satire, are entertaining and instructive even if we entirely omit the final chapters.

This undeniably sentimental tendency of Dickens does not interfere with the ethical value of his philosophy as a whole. His endings may be too concentratedly optimistic for most of us, but the distributed optimism throughout his books is based on a sound faith. He believed earnestly in the ultimate goodness of men and of society. He was not blind to the evil, but he hoped for regeneration. He recognized that evil is frequently caused by bad training and unwholesome environment (as in the case of Jonas Chuzzlewit or Rob the Grinder) although he showed in Oliver

"the principle of good surviving though every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last." [1] Some evil characters he endeavors to lighten by bringing out a few redeeming traits, but of such as Bill Sikes he says, "I fear there are in the world some insensible and callous natures, that do become, at last, utterly and irredeemably bad." [2] To summarize the refutation of the charges brought against Dickens' philosophy: He does not show evil or good to be the possession of any one class, but recognizes the right or wrong wherever he sees it; his sense of duty as a reformer led him to describe in detail the condition of the poor. He was not the type of reformer who had a definite platform of reform, but took as his mission the discovering of dark places, and the encouraging of a proper spirit of benevolence and good cheer to carry on the work of illumination. The majority of his characters are neither gilded saints nor lost sinners, but combine the normal strength and weakness of humanity. His ethics were founded on sound Christian doctrine, and it was only his superabundant optimism which sometimes led him to endeavor to show all the judgments of heaven taking place on earth. From all he said and wrote, it appears to me that Dickens, far from being one-sided in his attitude toward human nature and society, was many-sided, and was constantly trying to see and understand the whole panorama of human life. Some parts of the picture may be over-developed, others may not be so distinct, but we are a-

[2] Ibid.
[1] "Oliver Twist," Preface.

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ware of the whole expanse. Chesterton expresses himself aptly upon the subject of Dickens' optimistic philosophy: "If Dickens was an optimist, he was an uncommonly active and useful kind of optimist. If Dickens was a sentimentalist, he was a very practical sentimentalist. And the reason of this is one that goes deep into Dickens' social reform, and like every other real and desirable thing, involves a kind of mystical contradiction. If we are to save the oppressed, we must have two apparently antagonistic emotions in us at the same time. We must think the oppressed man intensely miserable, and at the same time intensely attractive and important. We must insist with violence upon his degradation: we must insist with the same violence upon his dignity." [1]

Dickens shows a tendency toward sentimentalism in his optimistic outlook upon life, but his scope was far too inclusive to allow a tendency to become an obsession. So we may conclude that his philosophy - far from being narrow, false and unethical, was broad, vital, and full of moral significance. As his philosophy pervaded all he wrote, we will expect to find also that his humor and satire have ethical value, and in order to determine it, we shall proceed to a study of his manner of using these two qualitities.

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[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 271,272.

## Chapter IV

# THE CHARACTER OF DICKENS' APPEAL AND GENERAL METHOD.

### The Character of Dickens' Appeal

When we look over the large body of Dickens criticism, we become aware that although critics have differed widely in their opinions of the author's philosophy and the characteristic traits of his work, the majority of them concede that, whatever faults of manner or philosophical viewpoint they may believe him to have possessed, he did exert a tremendous influence upon the life of his time. In the first chapter I have quoted critical opinions which tend to establish Dickens' place as a social teacher and reformer.[1] They all more or less find expression in the fine tribute paid by the Bishop of Manchester at the great novelist's death:

> He has been called... an apostle of the people. I suppose it is meant that he had a mission, but in a style and fashion of his own; a gospel, a cheery, joyous, gladsome message, which the people understood, and by which they could hardly help being bettered; for it was the gospel of kindliness, of brotherly love, of sympathy in the widest sense of the word..... He who has taught us our duty to our fellow-men better than we knew it before, who knew so well to weep with them who wept, and rejoice with them that rejoiced, who has shown forth in all his knowledge of the dark corners of the

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[1] See Chapter I, p. 9. (Crotch, W. Walter; Hughes, James L.) ; p. 12 (Crotch, W. Walter; Walters, J.C.); p. 13 (Norton, Charles Eliot; Swinburne, Algernon C. ) ; p. 14 (Chesterton, G.K.; Collier, W.F.) p. 15 (Crotch, W. Walter; Hughes, James L; Irving, Walter) ; p. 16 (Chesterton, G.K.; Farrar, Frederick W. ; Murray, D.W. );p. 17 (Canning, Albert S.G.; Chesterton, G.K.; Gissing, George; Walters, J.C. ).

> earth, how much sunshine may rest upon the lowliest lot , who had such evident sympathy with suffering, and such a natural instinct of purity that there is scarcely a page of the thousands he has written which might not be put into the hands of a little child, must be regarded by those who recognize the diversity of the gifts of the spirit, as a teacher sent from God. He would have been welcomed as a fellow-labourer in the common interests of humanity by Him who asked the question: ' If a man love not his brother whom he hath seen, how shall he love God whom he hath not seen ?' "[1]

Knowing Dickens' purpose as we do, understanding his philosophy, and seeing how the results of his work have been appreciated by his contemporaries as well as by critics of our own day, we may, I believe, safely interpret his influence as having ethical value. A mistaken idea would hardly persist so long and so continuously as has the tradition of Dickens' service to society.

In order to judge of the particular ethical value of Dickens' humor and satire, it will be our plan to study his methods of using them. In the very beginning we realize that if ethics is to be widely and dynamically related to conduct, it must be presented in such a manner as to appeal to the greatest number of people, and to appeal not only to their interest but to their understanding as well. The average person does not judge of ethical values by the formulated rules of a system, but rather by the degree in which certain qualities meet a conventional ideal of what is considered right in principle and conduct. An appeal to the general sentiment does not mean that standards are to be lowered, but that a common chord is to be struck, a chord none

[1] Forster, John, "Life of Charles Dickens" (n. d.) Ed. Chapman and Hall, p. 561.

the less true and fine for its universality. Dickens gained his contact with the universal heart through his humor. Upon this fact Gissing comments with discernment:

> "Holding as he did that the first duty of an author is to influence his reader for good, Dickens necessarily esteemed as the most precious of his gifts that by virtue of which he commanded so great an audience. Without his humor, he might have been a vigorous advocate of social reform, but as a novelist assuredly he would have failed; and as to the advocacy of far-reaching reforms by men who have only earnestness and eloquence to work with, English history tells its tale. Only because they laughed with him so heartily, did multitudes of people turn to discussing the question his page suggested.... Humor is the soul of his work. Like the soul of man, it permeates a living fabric/ which but for its creative breath, could never have existed." [1]

It was Dickens' theory that if you are to do any good as an adviser and teacher, you must first be friends with those you intend to teach. Few people like to have undisguised moral pills rammed down their throats, but let them see the suger coating, and they will take the dose willingly. Then when they have sucked off the sweetness and they come unawares upon the bitter, they will swallow that too, because the sweet taste lingers with them. Mr. Walters expresses this idea in different words when he says:

> "None suspected that this man of mirth was the strictest of censors; none imagined that his gambols were a plan of his campaign.... He was described as the "new humorist",.... and was thought to be a clever clown; and when he cracked his whip the gallant onlookers grinned, though it happened, quite accidentally, that the lash had a teasing habit of cutting across their flaccid faces. For he was only the jester, with japes and jollity, and the gentlemen of England split their sides at his Pickwick and Weller. But, when they were won to his side, held by his art, gathered in huge concourse, the jester revealed himself as knight-errant." [2]

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[2] Walters, J.C., "Phases of Dickens" (1911), pp. 269-270.

[1] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), pp. 215- 216.

This was Dickens' method of approach, and Chesterton says he should never have departed from it. [1] Gissing remarks:

> "What is called the popular conscience was on Dickens' side; and he had the immense advantage of being able to raise a hearty laugh even whilst pointing his lesson. Among the rarest of things is this thorough understanding between author and public, permitting a man of genius to say aloud with impunity that which all his hearers say within themselves dumbly, inarticulately. Dickens never went too far; never struck at a genuine conviction of the multitude... Would argument or authority have helped for one moment to win him a patient hearing ? We know that he never desired to provoke such antagonism. Broadly speaking, he was one with his readers, and therein lay his strength for reform." [2]

As to the relative values of Dickens' humor and satire, it may be said at the outset that in his use of satire he probably had a more specific ethical purpose, and accomplished more powerful, tangible results, while the effect of his pure humor, being usually upon the reader's own personal thoughts and actions, is therefore less evident. Nevertheless, especially for the reasons quoted above, it is through its mingling with humor that even the fiercest satire gains its appeal and retains its interest . The pages of humor and humorous satire in his books live longer in the memories of delighted readers than the few passages in which he writes in an almost unalloyed satiric vein. The uncompromising satire may outlive its use, but the humor will be perennially refreshing.

## The General Method of Dickens

Dickens makes character rather than situation the medium

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[2] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), pp. 143-144.
[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 269- 270.

through which he allows his humor and satire its freest play, and the best - and that means the majority - of his humorous and satiric characters are remarkable for their vividness. However much the reader may think the figures are exaggerated or impossible, they nevertheless remain indelibly impressed upon his memory. They all stand out clearly differentiated from every other kind, and even from others of their own kind. Mr. Micawber and Mark Tapley, alike as to their invincible optimism, are nevertheless both unique creations. Captain Cuttle, Pickwick, and Mr. Grewgious do not merge into a single composite personality, although they possess in common the qualities of kindness, cheerfulness and naiveté. Each character has its own divine and inalienable trademark printed upon it by the master-hand.

Dickens, in the master-pieces of his humor and satire, gives us not only personality, but the essence of personality. It is "personality plus" - exaggerated if you will, but an exaggeration which comes nearer the essential truth in its effect than the rather drab reality too many of us in our blindness see. In attempting to understand Dickens' method, it might be illuminating to draw a parallel from our own personal experience. Is it not true that we often think of our acquaintances and friends as embodiments of certain outstanding qualities - this one of sweetness, that one of energy and vigor, another of unselfishness, and so on - and that in all their words and actions we are inclined to see a reflection of their dominant trait? I believe that Dickens looked upon life in this way, and that in his great charact-

ers (which are nearly all examples of humorous or satiric portraiture) he exemplified this general fact. Forster expresses the opinion that "what a character, drawn by a master, will roughly present upon its surface, is frequently such as also to satisfy its more subtle requirements; and that when only the salient points or sharper prominences are thus displayed, the great novelist is using his undoubted privilege of showing the large degree to which human intercourse is carried on, not by men's habits or ways at their commonest, but by the touching of their extremes." [1] In the novels in which the reader's companionship with the characters is necessarily short, and the time in which a lasting impression can be made is brief, he condensed - sublimated-personality, and gave us its essence. It is intensified, vitalized, and is startlingly vivid. And the reason the reader does not feel cheated out of real human contact, is that Dickens always intensifies or exaggerates on the side of truth. Chesterton develops this point in commenting upon the character of the blue old Major in "Dombey and Son" (1848):

> "Major Bagstock is a grotesque, and yet he contains touch after touch of Dickens's quiet and sane observation of things as they are. He was always most accurate when he was most fantastic. Dombey and Florence are perfectly reasonable, but we simply know that they do not exist. The major is mountainously exaggerated, but we all feel that we have met him at Brighton. Nor is the rationale of this paradox difficult to see: Dickens exaggerated when he found a real truth to exaggerated.. In one sense, truth alone can be exaggerated; nothing else can stand the strain." [2]

We look upon the Dickens characters with the penetrative in-

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[2] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 188-189.
[1] Forster, John, "Life of Charles Dickens" (n. d.). Ed. Chapman and Hall, p. 589.

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sight of the author's personality, and they enlarge upon our vision until we see then with startling clearness. He himself never thought he was exaggerating, and it is probably true that what appears to many of us at first glance unusual, was merely the divinely common-place to Dickens. No two persons look at the same thing in the same way, and because our sight may be obscured, and because Dickens was undoubtedly second-sighted, shall we have the presumption to say that it was Dickens' vision which was wholly at fault ? In his characteristically eager way, he defends himself against the charge of false exaggeration. The preface to "Dombey and Son" (1848) contains the following: "I make so bold as to believe that the faculty (or the habit) of closely and carefully observing the characters of men, is a rare one. I have not even found, within my experience, that the faculty (or the habit) of closely and carefully observing the faces of men is a general one by any means." In the preface to "Martin Chuzzlewit" (1843) he reiterates:

> "What is exaggeration to one class of minds and perceptions is plain truth to another. That which is commonly called a long-sight, perceives in a prospect innumerable features and bearings non-existent to a short-sighted person. I sometimes ask myself whether there may occasionally be a difference of this kind between some writers and some readers; whether it is always the writer who colours highly, or whether it is now and then the reader whose eye for colour is a little dull ?
>
> "On this head of exaggeration I have a positive experience, more curious than the speculation I have just set down. It is this:- I have never touched a character precisely from life, but some counterpart of that character has incredulously asked me, 'Now really, did I ever really see one like it?'"

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[1] "Martin Chuzzlewit", Preface, Ed. Dana Estes and Co. (n.d.)

Chesterton here shows a brilliant understanding of Dickens' attitude which relates the author's own conception of himself and the reader's understanding of him:

> "Dickens was not content with being original, he had a wild wish to be true. He loved truth so much in the abstract that he sacrificed to the shadow of it his own glory. He denied his own divine originality, and pretended that he had plagiarized from life. He disowned his own soul's children and said he had picked them up in the street.
>
> "And in this mixed and heated mood of anger, and ambition, vanity and doubt, a new design was born. He loved to be romantic, yet he desired to be real. How if he wrote of a thing that was real and showed it to be romantic ? He loved real life; but he also loved his own way. How if he wrote his own real life, but wrote it in his own way ? How if he showed the carping critics who doubted the existence of his strange characters his own yet stranger existnece ? How if he forced these pedants and unbelievers to admit that Weller and Pecksniff, Crummles and Swiveller, whom they thought so improbably wild and wonderful, were less wild and wonderful than Charles Dickens ? " [1]

James Russell Lowell in his essay on Chaucer makes a remark apropos of the Father of English Poetry, which might also be admirably applied to Dickens. He asserts that "to make the common~~place~~ marvelous, as if it were a revelation, is the test of genius." [2] 'Making the common marvelous' precisely characterizes what Dickens did. He presents men and women in their queerness, or sordidness, or in their very common-placeness, and then, although we forget none of these things, by some magic he transmutes all the grossness or oddity into something to be loved or laughed over, - at any rate something to be treasured in the memory and thought over after the first enjoyment is past. One would turn with loathing from a reminiscence of Mrs. Gamp were her

[2] Lowell, James Russell, "Chaucer", My Study Windows, Houghton Mifflin Co., (1899), p. 228.

[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 194-195.

coarseness and intemperance presented with unbroken solemnity. But Dickens sees something vastly amusing in this fat, vulgar old nurse. We feel sure that he takes uproarious pleasure, as we do, in the fiction of the invisible Mrs. Harris. Sairy is a liar, but her chief lie is such a master-piece that we prefer it to the truth. Sairy is unfeeling and selfish, and dines magnificently on pickled slamon and cowcumbers while her patient tosses in an agony of feverish delirium. [1] The reader realizes perfectly that she is among the lowest of creatures - Dickens shows us no aspect of her which would contradict this realization - and yet the more we can see Sairy Gamp and hear her discourse, the greater becomes our fascination for her. Despite this idealization (Gissing calls it "the sublimation of the essence of Gamp") by which the unpleasant traits of Sairy seem somehow to be not present, we are - as Dickens wished us to be - overpoweringly convinced that she is the epitome of vulgarity and selfishness, and that she is an insult to her profession. George Gissing, who devotes several pages of his book to the unequalled Sarah, explains:

> "Vulgarity he leaves; that is the essence of the matter. Vulgarity unsurpassable is the essence of Mrs. Gamp. Vileness, on the other hand, becomes grotesquerie, wonderfully converted into a subject for laughter. Her speech, the basest ever heard from human tongue, by a process of infinite subtlety , which leaves it the same and yet not the same, is made an endless amusement, a source of quotation for laughing lips incapable of unclean utterance." [2]

Gissing says, moreover, that there is a difference between these figures of Dickens, humorously conceived and idealized, and those

[2] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), pp. 114-115.
[1] "Martin Chuzzlewit", vol. 2, chap. 25, pp. 462, 463.

which are drawn in deadly seriousness, with an even greater idealization (such as Alice Marlow in "Dombey and Son"). In the former a portion of the truth is omitted, but in the latter there has been a substitution of falsity.[1]

The Wellers (and I shall speak here particularly of the elder Weller) are another example of those creations which Dickens immortalized by idealizing them. We know that Mr. Weller is what some people would call intemperate. He is exceedingly fond of porter, and is supremely happy in his favorite bench at the Blue Boar. Undoubtedly his nose was red and his clothes were redolent of the stable. There is no attempt on the part of Dickens to conceal these eccentricities, but, in spite of ourselves, we grow almost to love them and consider them an inevitable part of the bigger and better Weller who wins us irresistibly by his jovial, unaffected optimism. What if he is naive and impractical ? If, withal, he can get as much enjoyment out of life as he does, should we begrudge it him ? Dickens does not intend Tony Weller to represent the ultimate ideal of manhood, but simply as a man abundantly filled with the joy of living. Paul Elmer More complains that "probably old Weller got such hilarious glee out of the misdoings of his wife and Stiggins as his words import, but what of a thousand weaker souls who hug the evil conditions of their lot ? " [2] To me that seems just the reason why Tony Weller and others like him, should be - because there <u>are</u> a 'thousand

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[2] More, Paul Elmer, "The Praise of Dickens", Shelburne Essays, Fifth Series (1908), p. 39.

[1] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), p. 116.

weaker souls' of whom every one knows, and whose weakness many have personally experienced. Tony is not an angel; he occasionally becomes angry when the Stigginses and other enlightened brethren overtempt his patience, and it has been said that some of his external characteristics are not of the most attractive. He is endowed with just enough human frailty that we are willing to believe that he is superhumanly gifted with the strength of good cheer. What people rarely see, but long to contemplate, is such an incarnation of unbounded good spirits as shine forth in Tony Weller (and Sam too for that matter). Unusual it may be- but that is what we crave: something above the level of the merely conventional and prosaic. Browning's lines,

> "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
> Else what's a heaven for ?" [1]

seem to find a peculiarly fitting application here. The Wellers and many of Dickens' other characters, vivid in their idealized realism, are inspiring examples of a man's reach - and it is ours to grasp.

Indeed, we may say that the unusual vividness of Dickens' humor and satire, with its idealization and sublimation of character, is exaggeration which is in complete harmony with the truth, and produces an effect through its unmistakability and its heightening of human possibilities. Although it may seem paradoxical to say so, Dickens was the master of realism in the realm of idealization. He grasped the very essences of truth in

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[1] Browning, Robert, "Andrea del Sarto," ll. 97,98.

things, and showed them, not as they seem to be to the obscured vision, but as they are present to the eyes of a seer. Gissing's criticism adequately refutes the charge of untrue exaggeration, and champions Dickens' method:

> "It seems to me that in all his very best work he pursues an ideal widely apart from that of caricature in any sense, and in other instances he permits himself an emphasis, like in kind to that of the caricaturist, but by its excellence of art, its fine sincerity of purpose, removed from every inferior association. To call Mrs. Gamp a caricature is an obvious abuse of language; not less so, I think, to apply the word to Mr. Pecksniff, or to Uriah Heep. Occasionally, missing the effect he intended, Dickens produced work which invites this definition; at times, again, he deliberately drew a figure with that literary overcharging which corresponds to the exaggeration, small or great, of professed caricaturists with the pencil. His finest humor, his most successful satire, belongs to a different order of art. To be convinced of this one need but think of the multiplicity of detail, all exquisitely finished, which goes to make up his best known portraits. Full justice has never been done to this abounding richness of invention, this untiring felicity of touch in minutiae innumerable. Caricature proceeds by a broad and simple method. It is no more the name for Dickens' full fervour of creation, than for Shakespeare's in his prose comedy. Each is a supreme idealist." [1]

Dickens, then, was not a caricaturist in his best art. It is not true that his characters are 'conceived in the manner of Jonson's humours' and are not individual personalities, - that they stand for character, but not for persons. [2] He does give us strikingly vivid portrayals of characters, because he had the talent to see the inner as well as the outer man. The figures do represent character, as every person does, but it is so minutely individual and personal, that they are anything but abstract personifications.

[2] See Chap. I,p.3;also Trail, Henry,D., "Social England" (1897), Vol. 6, p. 163. Cited in Moulton's Library, vol. VI., p. 597.

[1] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), pp. 168-169.

Dickens does not present his men and women with psychological introspection,but if they were described merely externally[1] we would not see the vivid revealing of personality which is one of his chief traits. He sought the germ of truth and good which is in everyone: in some cases he found more of it, in some cases much less, but because it is not a thing to be found in externals alone, he sought and revealed it in the spirit. It was 'Dickens the great dramatic observer'[2] who saw it, but first it was there to see, and he makes us recognize it too.

[2] Chapter I, p. 8.

[1] Chapter I, p. 7.

## Chapter V

## THE METHOD AND VALUE OF DICKENS' USE OF HUMOR

In studying Dickens' humor and satire, we find that the two are very closely related. The satire, and especially the satire at its best, is nearly always associated with humor, and it is rather difficult to determine the ethical value of Dickens' satire unless one includes in his judgment the humor which is invariably combined with it. It is, however, somewhat easier to discuss the ethical aspects of the humor aside from its use in satire, beacuse the former is also used extensively in non-satiric work. Therefore we shall first consider some examples of Dickens' methods of humorous appeal.

Dickens' humor has the delightful quality of genial warmth and friendly sympathy. We feel that the author more often laughs with his characters than at them - or if he does smile at their little foibles, it is with the utmost kindliness, entirely devoid of cynicism. As Gissing says, "Humour deals gently with fact and fate; in its smile there is forbearance, in its laugh there is kindliness."[1] Indeed we are not surprised to discover that one of Dickens' favorite types of character portrayal is that in which he can put before our eyes an unusual, even grotesque figure, and then magically invest its very oddity with something so charming, so lovable, and yet so laughable, that we

[1] Gissing, George, "Charles Dickens" (1912), p. 117.

are at once captivated, and ashamed that we had hitherto been too blind to see the hidden charm he has revealed to us. Forster appreciates this attitude of Dickens, and says that he reached the ideal of his work,

> "not by presenting with added comeliness or grace the figures which life is ever eager to present as of its best, but by connecting the singularities and eccentricities which ordinary life is apt to reject or overlook, with the appreciation that is deepest and the laws of insight that are most universal. It is thus that everything human is brought within human sympathy. It was at the heart of whatever Dickens wrote, making him the intimate of every English household, and a familiar friend wherever the language is spoken whose stores of harmless pleasure he has so largely increased. Above all it was the secret of the hope he had that his books might help to make people better." [1]

I think this admirable trait of Dickens is rarely illustrated better than in the delineation of the 'angular' Mr. Grewgious of "Edwin Drood" (1869- ). He is so queer, and Dickens humorously sets him forth with such a thorough appreciation of his oddity; he is withal so lovable, and Dickens uses all his art to convince us of his unique charm. The reason we do not think of Mr. Grewgious as an ugly impossible old bore, is that he was so far from seeming so to Dickens, and the creator's kindly humor has miraculously revealed both outer eccentricity and inner loveliness. In his description of Mr. Grewgious we see this wonderful blending faculty of Dickens' art:

> "With too great length of throat at his upper end, and too much ankle-bone and heel at his lower; with an awkward and hesitating manner; with a shambling walk; and with what is called a near sight - which perhaps prevented his observing how much white cotton stocking he displayed to the public eye, in contrast with his black suit - Mr. Grewgious still had some

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[1] Forster, John, "Life of Charles Dickens" (n. d.), Ed. Chapman and Hall, pp. 588-589.

> strange capacity in him of making on the whole an agreeable impression."[1]

And again, notice the humorous sympathy amounting almost to tenderness:

> "His voice was as hard and dry as himself, and Fancy might have ground it straight, like himself, into high-dried snuff. And yet, through the very limited means of expression that he possessed, he seemed to express kindness. If Nature had but finished him off, kindness might have been recognizable in his face at this moment. But if the notches in his forehead wouldn't fuse together, and if his face would work and wouldn't play, what could he do, poor man! "[2]

In his preface to "Pickwick" (1837-39), Dickens says that, "in real life the peculiarities and oddities of a man who has anything whimsical about him, generally impress us first, and that it is not until we are better acquainted with him that we usually begin to look below these superficial traits, and to know the better part of him." This natural process of development is followed by Dickens in his portrayal of Mr. Grewgious and in that of his other humorously eccentric characters. There is no surprising metamorphosis-the odd characters are still odd at the end of the story - but one has learned to understand and love them, because the humor with which Dickens draws them is so penetratingly true and so exquisitely kind. He hints at his purpose when he comments upon the gentle way the 'Angular' and 'Unnatural' Mr. Grewgious takes care of Rosa Bud when she comes to him for protection:

> "The respectful tenderness with which, on one knee, before her, he helped to remove her hat, and disentangle her pretty hair from it, was quite a chivalrous sight. Yet who, knowing him only on the surface, would have expected chivalry -

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[2] Ibid., Chap. IX, p. 84.

[1] "Edwin Drood," Chap. IX, p. 82.

> and of the true sort, too, not the spurious - from Mr. Grewgious ?" 1

No, Mr. Grewgious is not 'Angular' or 'Unnatural', even though he himself thinks so. Someone saw the revelation such characters as his hold, and has made us see it too.

Captain Ed'ard Cuttle is another classic example of Dickens' charitable and revealing humor - the old captain - "when found make a note of" - with his ruddy nose full of shiny knobs, the inevitable hard hat and its inevitable red ring upon the forehead of its owner, the flapping blue coat, and the versatile hook. (One sees that he belongs to the Grewgious family!) His naiveté and 'amazing artfulness", although almost ludicrous, awaken in us a kindly smile rather than loud laughter. The Captain's embassy to Mr. Dombey in behalf of Florence and Wal'r is impossibly impractical, and tragically funny, - Dickens appreciates the humor of it all, but that does not make him sneer at the spirit of the worthy seaman. He understands him , and wishes us to do so too. Dickens says:

> "Captain Cuttle, in the exercise of that surprising talent for deep-laid and unfathomable scheming, with which ( as is not unusual in men of transparent simplicity) he sincerely believed himself to be endowed by nature, had gone to Mr. Dombey's house on the eventful Sunday, winking all the way, as a vent for his superfluous sagacity, and had presented himself in the full lustre of his ankle-jacks before the eyes of Towlinson." 2

The Captain who could care so tenderly and reverently for Florence in her sorrow, is not to be scoffed at, despite his ruddy nose, a hard hat, or other minor external traits. Dickens loved

[2] "Dombey and Son", Vol. I, Chap. XVII, p. 255.

[1] "Edwin Drood", Chap. XX, p. 223.

such men for theiressential manliness, and he makes us love and respect them as well.

In Captain Cuttle and Mr. Grewgious, I have described in some detail Dickens' method of portraying this type of character, because his method here is characteristic of the many similar portraits which he created so lavishly. Susan Nipper, blunt, sturdy, defiant, - even Dickens called her "Spitfire" at her first appearance, and says that she was "so desperately sharp and biting that she seemed to make one's eyes water" [1] - what limitless capacity for tenderness and staunch loyalty does she display in her love for "Miss Floy" - until, like Toots, we feel inclined to say "the oftener we can repeat that extraordinary woman the better." [2] Betsy Trotwood, the militant aunt of David Copperfield, in her irate disappointment at David's being David and not Betsy T. Copperfield, throws her bonnet at unoffending Dr. Chillip; but later she takes the little boy into her care, and shows us that after all, under the brusque aggressiveness of her manner, she has a heart of gold. [3] Mrs. Jarley, of the famous wax-works, may have a certain amount of vulgarity, and professional vanity and condescension in her disposition, - she imbibes freely of the contents of a suspicious bottle, and she grows shrill in her championship of the Jarley Wax-works, which are the Alpha and Omega of existence to

[3] "David Copperfield," Vol. I, Chap. I, p. 13; Chap. XIV.
[2] Ibid., Vol. II, Chap. XXXII, p. 487.
[1] "Dombey and Son," Vol. I, Chap. III, p. 29.

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her - but for all that she is good-humored and kind, quite of her own accord, to little Nell and her grandfather. Miss Twinkleton, of the Female Seminary in "Edwin Drood", is a typically humorous portrayal of the 'old maid school ma'am' - "icily regular, splendidly null". It is when she leaves the school, generously accompanies Rosa in her loneliness, and battles with the hostile Billicken, that she reveals another side of her nature which has not been totally withered in her pedagogical career.[1] In all these figures we see the same appreciation of essential humor, and the same charitable, penetrative insight for essential worth. They all teach a lesson of true democracy, but not by a too obvious emphasis upon the moral. Dickens makes virtue comradely, and gives it an intimate, human touch. We become charmed with the enchanting oddity of the Cuttles, the Grewgiouses, and all their kind - we sympathize with their peculiarities, and suddenly we realize that we are letting these unique creatures ( who are so impractical and unworldly) teach us - the experienced, the conventional - something which we needed to know better than we did before! It is for some reason (probably a selfish one) a fact that the ordinary reader will more readily allow himself to be led into learning moral lessons from some one who is just a trifle queerer or less fortunate than himself, whose personality is attractive enough to win respect, and to whom he feels himself bound by sympathy or interest, - than from some exquisite, super-mundane creature who has every advantage and every reason to be endowed with all the

[1] "Edwin Drood," Chap. XXII, p. 248-253.

graces and virtues under the sun. Of course, one would not wish all of Dickens' characters to be outwardly peculiar and inwardly lovely, It is not necessary to possess an uncouth exterior in order to be blessed with a pure heart. There are figures in Dickens which are both good and attractive, which have their little human idiosyncrasies, but are not odd. Of such are John Jaundyce, Ruth Pinch, Pip, and many others. I do not mention Dickens' stock figures of beauty and goodness which do not impress us as real.

One critic[1] has said that Dickens' laughter is all of the fun-god, not of that desirable kind which has a touch of tears. I think this is a mistake, and that some of Dickens' best humor in its sweetness and kindly understanding is touched with something very like sadness,-and yet it is a pleasant and thankful sadness. It is this residue of sober thought that comes after the laughter which makes the picture linger in our minds. Characters like Mr. Grewgious, Susan Nipper, and Captain Cuttle are presented in aspects of pathetic humor, and the contrast of their grotesqueness with their gentleness is usually the source of it. The wild and red Miss Pross of "A Tale of Two Cities" (1859), despite her wildness and redness, rises almost to the height of grandeur in her affection for her Lady-bird, when she struggles with Madame Defarge in order to give Lucie more time to escape.[2] There is a grim humor in Miss Pross's manner of defying the terrible Frenchwoman, but there is nothing humorous

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[2] "A Tale of Two Cities," Chap. XIV, pp. 389- 393.

[1] Merivale, Herman, "About Two Great Novelists," Temple Bar, vol. 83 ( ), p. 202.

about her purpose or her unselfish devotion to her mistress. Miss Tox, with her affected little airs, and her sentimental idealizing of Mr. Dombey, is funny, and yet not funny when one stops to think of the lonely, uneventful life of this maiden-lady of uncertain years, who hopefully cherished a hopeless romantic dream as wistfully as any girl. Traddles, bravely happy and optimistic in his poverty, unselfishly glad to help the Micawbers who are in even more straightened circumstances than himself, is more pathetic in his humor than he could possibly be if he were consistently gloomy, and he ingratiates himself far deeper into our sympathies. Poor, afflicted Guster, the Snagsby's maid of all work - who can help but laugh at her awkwardness, her dullness; but who can help being touched by her kindness to Jo in whom she sees a fellow-outcast; and who, in spite of laughter, can help realizing that Guster is humanly more of a tragedy than a comedy ?

In speaking of this type of humorous appeal, memory almost invariably summons up such scenes as that where the irrepressible Swiveller plays at cribbage with the poor little Marchioness, stunted in mind and body; [1] or those pathetically funny moments when the abject Toots almost chokes with inexpressible adoration in the presence of Florence, and can only stammer out, "It's of no consequence." [2] The pictures of Wemmick and the Aged in "Great Expectations" (1860-61), are likewise of this kind. There is something highly amusing in the Castle, with all its little

[2] "Old Curiousity Shop," Vol. II, Chap. II, pp. 14-16.
[1] "Dombey and Son," Vol. II, Chap. XI, p. 161- 162.

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accessories especially designed by Wemmick for the delectation of the Aged Parent. There is something deliciously humorous about Wemmick's solicitous care of his father, and in the latter's enjoyment of his simple daily pleasures. It is worth going far to see the Aged's exultation in the nightly performance of the Stinger.[1] And yet to me there is a great deal more than mere humor there. There is the unmistakable significance of the sweetness of small joys, a realization that a little loving and unselfish service can make the difference between mere life and life more abundantly. Through the humor we see a larger meaning; the simple things of everyday life are glorified and yet they are made to seem unaffectedly so. One feels the nobility of generous, spontaneous affection and service. To illustrate with another well-known example: There is, of course, the Cratchits' Christmas dinner. Happiness and the Christmas spirit are here incarnate. Bob Cratchit only has fifteen "bob" a week, Tiny Tim is lame and frail, and the shadow of Scrooge hangs over the house, but on this day all is holiday cheer. The dinner, although it does not sound sumptuous from the bald enumeration of its viands, gives nevertheless an impression of magnificence.

> "There never was such a goose. Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked. Its tenderness and flavor, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. Eked out by the apple sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, as Mrs. Cratchit said with great delight ( surveying one small

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[1] "Great Expectations, " Chap. XXV, p. 217.

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atom of a bone upon the dish) they hadn't ate it all at last! Yet everyone had had enough, and youngest Cratchits in particular, were steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows! "[1]

The picture of this family making for themselves unlimited happiness out of their very limited resources, is I think at once full of keen humor and a certain pathos. It makes one ashamed to be discontented after one has heard Tiny Tim say, "God bless us everyone!"

Although some of Dickens' humor has the 'touch of tears', another type is that which is overflowing with the sense of joy and benevolence. In reading such passages one is carried away by the conviviality, the radiant good cheer that pours from the pages. One lingers with reminiscent pleasure over these happy scenes: The good comradeship of the Captain, and Sol Gills and Walter at the Little Midshipman, when the old Madiera is brought from its security, and the Captain roars the ballad of "Lovely Peg";[2] the delightful intimacy of that dinner crowned by Ruth Pinch's beef-steak pudding;[3] the cozy warmth of Sunday evening tea by the fireside in Wemmick's Castle, with the Aged making mountains of toast, and Miss Skiffins brewing jorams of tea.[4] One cannot help being put in a pleasant humor when everyone else is having such a spontaneously, uproariously good time as that of the Christmas party of the Pickwickians at Dingley Dell, with everyone in jovial spirits, from the Fat Boy to Grandma Wardle;[5]

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[5] "Pickwick Papers," Chap. XXVIII.
[4] "Great Expectations," Chap. XXXVII.
[3] "Martin Chuzzlewit," Vol. II, Chap. XIV, pp. 220-222.
[2] "Dombey and Son, " Vol. I, Chap. IV, pp. 48-51; Chap. X, pp. 152-3
[1] "A Christmas Carol," pp. 48.

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or the dance at old Fezziwig's, - Mrs. Fezziwig "one vast substantial smile", and the one-piece orchestra "tuning like fifty stomach-aches." Scrooge, speaking to the Spirit, voices Dickens' message. The Ghost has just said, "A small matter to make these silly folks so full of gratitude.... He has spent but a few pounds of your mortal money: three or four perhaps. Is that so much that he deserves this praise ?" And Scrooge replies: It isn't that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up. What then ? The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune." [1]

Chesterton, in speaking of the effect of the "Christmas Carol" (1843), makes this comment:

> "The beauty and the real blessing of the story do not lie in the mechanical plot of it, the repentance of Scrooge, probable or improbable; they lie in the great furnace of real happiness that glows through Scrooge and everything around him; that great furnace, the heart of Dickens. Whether the Christmas visions would or would not convert Scrooge, they convert us.... The story sings from end to end like a happy man going home; and, like a happy and good man, when it cannot sing, it yells." [2]

Lastly we come to the farcical humor of Dickens - the wonderful, impossibly wild creations like Mr. Mantalini, the oracular Bunsby, the terrifying MacStinger, and the somnolent Fat Boy. Even a mere mention of their names brings a chuckle to the reminiscent reader of Dickens, Needless to say, they make no part-

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[2] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), p. 173.
[1] "A Christmas Carol", pp. 33,34.

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icular appeal to the ethical sense, but a contemplation of their antics furnishes many a happy hour of relaxation in laughter - "A little laughter now and then, Is relished by the best of men"- and so even the pure humor for humor's sake has its value.

Even a comparatively short survey of Dickens' method in his use of humor will convince us that here we have something more than the work of "a matchless mimic", - "of no deep seriousness"; - more than the ebullitions of an 'exuberance of animal spirits,' and the playful offerings of a single-minded worshipper of the fun-god. [1] It is Dickens' conscious and serious purpose in his humor that transforms it from humor for humor's sake, into humor for humanity's sake. His talents might have led him to display his gift in uproarious farce or stinging ridicule alone, but instead he used it for a larger end. Charitableness and tolerance are the distinguishing traits of his humor. He transfers to us his own strong belief that there is goodness and beauty even under unpromising exteriors. Chesterton reminds us: "If we are to look for lessons, here at least is the last and deepest lesson of Dickens. It is in our own daily life that we are to look for the portents and the prodigies." [2] Some of Dickens' best humor has a touch of tears which arouses our affection and compassion, and gives us a better understanding of the sweetness and fineness of human relationships. Then, too, there is the frankly exuberant humor of unbounded benevolence and good cheer, which is inevit-

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[2] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), p. 264.

[1] See Chapter I, pp. 2, 3.

ably communicated from author to reader, and the farcically humorous creations which awaken hearty and soul-stirring laughter. Of course Dickens was a superlative mimic; to be sure he was overflowing with boyish exuberance; it is useless to deny that he did pay homage to the fun-god; - but we must look farther than these few aspects of humor when we study a man of such versatile genius as Dickens, especially when we know that his genius was dedicated to a high purpose.

## Chapter VI

## THE METHOD AND VALUE OF DICKENS' USE OF SATIRE

Of Dickens' satire it may be stated with truthful generality, that it always concerned itself with something worth satirizing. Sometimes it was the mismanagement of the government, or of prisons or schools, sometimes it was an embodied national weakness, sometimes merely a personal characteristic which was attacked, but it was invariably some condition which Dickens' keen sight saw to be in need of improvement. We have seen that he emphasized certain things more than others because he was writing for a particular time with its particular evils, but that his philosophy of life, which is reflected in his satire, possessed soundness and strength. Dickens' satire was often marvelously successful in attaining the ends he desired, at other times much less so, but at all times it was earnest and sincere in purpose, untainted by cynicism.

Theoretically the ethical appeal should be strongest in the novels which contain the most uncompromising satire little relieved by humor, because there the moral purpose is so unflinchingly kept before the reader. On the contrary, just the opposite is true. The school in "Hard Times" (1854) does not make so lasting an impression upon us as does Mr. Blimber's famous forcing establishment in "Dombey and Son" (1848), nor as does the infamous institution called a school, presided over

by Mr. Squeers. When Dickens looks only on the darker side of life, we somehow feel that he has lost his wholesome, balanced outlook upon the world. When Dickens is hopelessly depressed, we despair with him. We miss the powerful contact of the motive and creative energy that come from him in his happier moments. Of "Little Dorrit" (1856-57), which has in it much of tragical satire, Mr. Chesterton makes the criticism:

> "It is nothing that a man dwells on the darkness of dark things; all healthy men do that. It is when he dwells on the darkness of bright things that we have reason to fear some disease of the emotions.... "Little Dorrit" is a very interesting, sincere, and fascinating book. But for all that, I fancy it is the one collapse." [1]

An example of the two methods of treatment and their relative success may be seen in Mr. Micawber and Mr. Dorrit . Chesterton asserts that these two portraits are two different views of the same man, Dickens' father. One was drawn in a mood of humorous insight which saw the brighter side of unsuccess, the other in a mood of depression which was aware only of the disappointing failure. "The whole meaning of the character of Mr. Micawber is that a man can be always almost rich by constantly expecting riches. The lesson is really an important one in our sweeping modern sociology. We talk of the man whose life is a failure, because it is always a crisis." [2] In Mr. Dorrit, Dickens, staring at Wilkins Micawber... could only see the weakness and the tragedy that was made possible by his in-

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[2] Chesterton, G.K., "Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens" (1911), pp. 181, 184,185.

[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens" (1906), pp. 269-270.

difference, his indulgence, or his bravado."[1] And the critic concludes, "the fact remains that the study of the slow demoralization of a man through mere misfortune was not a study congenial to Dickens, not in accordance with his original inspiration, not connected in any manner with the thing he had to say. In a word, the thing is not quite a part of himself: and he was not quite himself when he did it."[2] While Mr. Dorrit is unknown to or forgotten by many, the memory of Mr. Micawber is green wherever there is a reader of Dickens, and he is known besides to many who have never looked between the covers of "David Copperfield", - such is the vitality of his personality.

Thus, as we have observed in another chapter[3], it is where satire is combined with humor that it exerts its greatest influence. The satire contains the ethical teaching, but the humor makes it teachable. Humor imbues the satire with realism and vitality. The satirized characters through its use become so intensely interesting that one wishes to see more and more of them, and yet vices are never made attractive, nor is the satire thus rendered futile. The result is that the picture imprints itself do vividly upon our minds that the meaning is unescapable. The character of Mrs. Gamp has been commented upon at some length elsewhere,[4] and Major Bagstock is another brilliant illustration of this type. In incredulous wonder and delight we watch the Major strutting about and trying to bully everyone into admiring 'rough and tough old Joey B.', but no

4. Ibid., Part 2.
3. See Chapter IV, part 1.
1. Chesterton, G.K.,"Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens" (1911), p. 182.
2. Ibid., p. 183.

reader was ever induced really to like him , or to be deceived as to his true character. The satire is too unmistakable to lead the humor astray. Mrs. Skewton would be too absolutely sordid and repulsive to look upon if her vanity, her selfishness, her entire 'littleness' were not seen with an eye for the pitiful absurdity of it all, - pitiful absurdity, so that we not only laugh but reflect. The persecution of little Oliver by Noah Claypole and Charlotte would seem unspeakably cruel, and needlessly so, if it were not presented with a glimpse of humor to lessen the strain. In the encounter between Noah and Oliver our most active sympathies are of course with Oliver, and we feel with him a rage against the big bully, but it is the humor with which the situation is handled by Dickens,- showing the ridiculous lack of any real worth in Charlotte, Noah, and Mrs. Sowerberry, that makes us all the more eager to respond to the cause of the poor orphan. [1] How the ugliness and horror of the life of Fagin, the Artful Dodger and the other thieves in their squalid den would oppress us, were it not that Dickens presents it to us at first with a semi-humorous whimsicality through the eyes of innocent little Oliver. [2] And yet when one stops to think, the fact that these criminals take their life so lightly is a discouraging sign of their inurement to it. When Mr. Pickwick spends his first night in the Fleet, we are just about to succumb with him to the misery and squalor

2. Ibid., Chap. IX,X.
1. "Oliver Twist," Chap. VI.

of the prison, when the Zephyr, Mr. Smangle, and Mr. Mivins come upon the scene. They are not the type of characters that arouse gay laughter, and yet they exemplify a sort of grim humor. For a time they seem to take one's mind off the unpleasant prison surroundings, but when the scene is past one realizes that in spite of the momentary enjoyment one receives from their abandoned and roguish cleverness, the effect in the end is a deepened sense of the sordidness of some lives and the pity of such utter waste of manhood.

The essence of much of Dickens' satire is ridicule, which is perhaps the most potent satirical weapon. A person may hear himself reproached as selfish, arrogant, cruel, et cetera, and remain unmoved, but let him feel that he is being spoken of as foolish or ridiculous, and in the majority of cases, he will experience a profound reaction. No one wishes to admit even to himself that he is foolish enough to inspire ridicule, and if the accusation has been made that he is, he will look to his actions and attempt to refute the odious charge. Mr. Walters speaks of this quality of Dickens' satire: "Sheer genius led him to resolve on making the foolish laugh at their own follies. .... He had the prescience to realize that what is ridiculed out of existence does not survive, whereas force may only lead to concealment, not to extinction." [1] When Dickens has pointed out an evil which has its ludicrous aspects, he displays a joyous abandon in showing "what fools these mortals be". The very

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[1] Walters, J.C., "Phases of Dickens" (1911), Introduction, p.xxi.

absurdity of his satirical picture cuts sharper than a serpent's tooth. G.K. Chesterton praises Dickens' satire in these words:

> "Dickens was among other things a satirist, a pure satirist..... The essence of satire is that it perceives some absurdity inherent in the logic of some position , and that it draws that absurdity out and isolates it, so that all can see it. Thus for instance when Dickens says, 'Lord Coodle would go out; Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn't come in; and there being no people to speak of in England except Coodle and Doodle, the country has been without a Government'; when Dickens says this he suddenly pounces on and plucks out the one inherent absurdity in the English party system which is hidden behind all its paraphenalia of Parliaments and Statutes, elections and ballot papers. When all the dignity and all the patriotism and all the public interest of the English constitutional party conflict have been fully allowed for, there does remain the bold, bleak question which Dickens in substance asks, 'Suppose I want someone else who is neither Coodle or Doodle.' This is the great quality called satire; it is a kind of taunting reasonableness; and it is inseparable from a kind of insane logic which is often called exaggeration." [1]

Dickens made the evil he ridiculed so obvious that no one could mistake it, even in himself. He made it so impossibly absurd that it was marked forever, and no self-respecting person would wish to be branded with the same stigma . After a contemplation of the divine insolence of Mr. Sapsea's pride, or the almost equal audacity of Old Deportment Turveydrop's smugly selfish benevolence, who would have the courage consciously to betray such entire self-complacence or such selfishness? When one has seen the bland hypocrisy, the consciously moral, condescending virtue of Mr. Pecksniff; the small vanity and outwardly conventional gentility of the Kenwigses; the nagging inquisitiveness and vigilant jealousy of Mrs. Snagsby; - when one has seen these atro-

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[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens" (1911), p. 92.

phies of the human spirit, one sighs, takes a long introspective inventory of one's own heart, and says devoutly, "From such as these, good Lord deliver us.' "

It is sometimes objected that Dickens derives so much enjoyment from his ridicule, that he indulges in it to the exclusion of everything else, and does not present the sane other side of the same picture. At first sight, this may appear to be true, for of course it is undeniable that he revels in his ludicrous delineations of characters and situations. Whatever may have been his spontaneous enjoyment, however, we know that he had also a purpose in thus bringing evils into the spot-light. He was aware that his countrymen were liable to become too complacent, and in their self-satisfaction not realize the foolishness of their actions. On the other hand, they would probably not err in the direction of thinking themselves too imperfect. Therefore Dickens held up for laughter their besetting sins to which they were blind; and gave somewhat less space to their dominant virtues of which they were already sufficiently conscious. This was what he did in his much-condemned social satire.[1] Practically all the criticism of Dickens' satire has centered about the question as to the realism and justice of his satire of the higher classes. If we believe that his social satire bespeaks a grudge against the upper classes, we might also believe that he had a grudge against his own class, some

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[1] See Chapter I, pp. 4,5.

of whom he satirized even more relentlessly. The Veneerings, in their brand-new gentility, the Bumbles, Old Turveydrop, Sampson and Sally Brass, the philanthropic Pardiggles and the Jellybys are presented in as unflattering a light as any of Dickens' characters. None of these people would probably have admitted the truth of the picture drawn of them - all would have called it a flagrantly unkind exaggeration. And yet we, who view them objectively, believe the satire to be true. Just so it was with Dickens' satire of the nobility and high society. The satire, of which they were the objects, appeared to them a maliciously false picture drawn by one outside the charmed circle, who knew nothing of their life. The fact is, that Dickens is no more malicious in his portraits of them than he is in many others. He was too fair to rail for the mere love of railing. His very distance from the higher class he satirized made him see the peculiarities and faults of which they were ignorant, or which they were too proud to admit. The distance at which Dickens stood handicapped him in giving an accurate picture of the intricate social machinery of high society, but he was near enough to see clearly some of the prominent characteristics of members of that society. Dickens could probably not have given us a picture of the ideal gentleman of the nobility, but he did give us a true picture of some gentlemen of that class. The satire has ethical value, nevertheless, for it is realistic and just, as far as it goes. It is perhaps to be regretted that he did not paint the complete canvas, but even genius has its limitations, and we may rejoice

that Dickens' were not of great enough importance to detract at all materially from his influence as a moral teacher. In his typically emphatic way Chesterton says:

> "The statement that Dickens could not describe a gentleman is, like most popular animadversions against Dickens, so very thin and one-sided a truth as to be for serious purposes a falsehood. When people say that Dickens could not describe a gentleman, what they mean is this, and so far what they mean is true. They mean that..... Dickens did not describe a gentleman in the way that gentlemen describe gentlemen..... But when it comes to saying that he did not describe them well, that is another matter, and that I should emphatically deny. The things that really are odd about the upper English class he saw with startling promptitude and penetration, and if the upper English class does not see these odd things in itself, it is not because they are not there, but because we are all blind to our own oddities..... I have often heard a dear old English oligarch say that Dickens could not describe a gentleman, while every note of his own voice and turn of his hand recalled Sir Leicester Deadlock."[1]

It is not to be wondered at that Dickens, with a satire so keen and telling, should have been accused by its victims of ridiculing the whole of humanity for the errors of a few. It is fortunately true that Dickens was never so unfair as to do this. If he satirized some of the foibles of human beings, it does not follow that he found fault with all traits of human character. If he attacked wrongs done in the name of religion and philantropy, one does not need to draw the conclusion that he thought lightly of these things. Indeed, if we study Dickens we find that it was his love of the goodness,and truth,and beauty in sacred things that led him to attack their abuse so vehemently. In the preface to "Pickwick" (1837-39), he vindicates himself of any such false charge:

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[1] Chesterton, G.K., "Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens" (1911), pp. 125.126.

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> "Lest there be any well-intentioned persons who do not perceive the difference.... between religion and the cant of religion, piety and the pretence of piety, a humble reverence for the great truths of Scripture, and an audacious and offensive obtrusion of its letter and not its spirit in the commonest dissensions and meanest affairs of life, to the extraordinary confusion of ignorant minds, let them understand that it is always the latter and never the former, which is satirized as being, according to all experience, inconsistent with the former, impossible of union with it, and one of the most evil and mischevious falsehoods existent in society - whether it establsih its head-quarters, for the time being, in Exeter Hall, or Ebenezer Chapel, or both."

Frank T. Marzials, in his "Life of Dickens" gives a critic's opinion: "With all his boisterous merriment, his volleys of inextinguishable laughter, he never makes game of what is at all worthy of respect. Here ("Pickwick") as in his later books, right is right and wrong wrong, and he is never tempted to jingle his jester's bell out of season, or make right look ridiculous." [1]

As I have said, Dickens oftem makes the absurd side of things seem predominant, and he realized and meant it to be so, [2] but he never fails to show us an example or examples of an opposite kind - not of ideal persons, but of natural human beings who have enough nobility of character to be a hopeful and inspiring contrast. If the oratorical and aggressive Mr. Honeythunder, the suave Chadband, and the red-nosed and sentimental Stiggins are unpleasant side-lights on the clergy, we are compensated by the portrait of the quiet, kindly sympathetic Canon Crisparkle, with the fine blending in his character of humor and seriousness, gentleness and strength. There

[2] "Martin Chuzzlewit," Preface, p. vi.

[1] Marzials, Frank T., "Life of Dickens" (1887), p. 46.

are Dodson and Fogg, Sampson and Sally Brass, and Mr. Vholes, all superlative examples of rascality in the legal profession, - in which justice ought to reside - but there also comes upon the stage merry, active, helpful little Mr. Perker who, despite his being a member of the scandalously corrupt profession , is kind and just and unselfish enough to be of valuable service to simple Mr. Pickwick in times of trouble. Even in his sweeping satire of America - although we wish it were not quite so inclusive - Dickens is fair enough to introduce Mr. Bevan, who is all that Elijah Pogram, Jefferson Brick and Mr. Chollop are not. Not to omit some examples of the 'social satire' : Lord Verisopht and Sir John Chester are of course thoroughly despicable, but dignified Sir Leicester and Cousin Feenix of the unmanageable legs, are not at all so. We look upon them with tolerant humor as Dickens did, and we cannot help but sympathize with poor old Deadlock in his prostration at his wife's disgrace and death. For another study in contrasts we may turn to "Bleak House". Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby, although diametrically opposed in their philanthropic methods, are neither of them endowed with the true spirit of social service. This does not mean that all women are so handicapped, for Esther Summerson, totally different from both Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby, is a real angel of mercy. So Dickens gives us the light and the shadow, and we may choose: but his power of delineation has already made the choice unmistakable.

One of the chief reasons that Dickens' satire has had the eth-

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ical influence it has, is that it is not cold or impersonal, but possesses the quality of human contact. The great satires on institutions, and national and social traits gain a large part of their appeal from the fact that they are not presented abstractly, but are shown in their relation to the people who live under them. In "Bleak House" (1852-53), the pathetic figure of Jo of Tom-All-Alone's is a silent but powerful accusation of the neglect of Society to care for its 'little ones'. There is no violent and long-winded arraignment - the spectacle of Jo's miserable life, and his death in his first moments of real happiness is enough. Dickens only says briefly but trenchantly:

> "Dead, Your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day." [1]

Funerals are a sad matter at best, but a new and additionally pathetic light is cast upon them in Dickens' description of the funeral of Mrs. Gargery. Mr. Trabb, the undertaker who takes the pleasure of an artist in his profession, is the chief stage manager of the final rites, and he omits no detail of the stage properties to make the performance professionally perfect. Poor Joe, the only person present who ever really cared for the deceased, is in agony under all these artificial conventions. He whispers sadly to Pip, "Which I meantersay, sir, as I would in preference have carried her to the church myself, along with three or four friendly ones wot come to it

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[1] "Bleak House," Vol II, Chap. XVI, p. 231.

with willing harts and arms, but it were considered wot the neighbors would look down on such and would be of opinions as it were wanting in respect."[1] The uselessness and hypocrisy of these 'suits and trappings of woe' is keenly satirized in the fact that all the apparent 'chief mourners', who are revelling in the theatricality of grief, are indeed the very ones who think nothing of the dead woman. Simple Joe Gargery, the one really tender-hearted and grief-stricken figure, is suffering twice as much as he normally would, because of the inconsiderate officiousness of the undertaker. No diatribe against sham formality in funerals could have been half so powerful as this touching picture of the effect of the custom upon Joe Gargery.[2]

The Yorkshire schools are horrible even whem one knows only the lifeless facts, but let one see the suffering they caused in the lives of real children, and one becomes actively indignant. Dickens describes the workings of Chancery, and we realize the terrible power of this slowly-moving, all-devouring monster. But we do not appreciate fully the tragedy it leaves in its wake until we see what it has done to poor, crazed Miss Flite, who still madly hopes on, in spite of the wreckage it has made of her mind and fortune; how it fastens its tentacles upon young Richard Carstone, and develops in him such a fatal fascination that he wastes his youth in hopelessly hoping for something which never materializes; how it casts its shadows

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[2] Ibid., Chapter XXXV.
[1] "Great Expectations", Chap. XXXV, p. 293.

over Ada,and then indirectly upon Esther. Even John Jaundyce says "the wind is in the west" whenever Chancery is mentioned, and he escapes greater vexation only because he is strong enough to withstand the almost irresistible force. These victims of the monster are not unusually weak,helpless creatures,but are ordinary human beings caught in the toils of something more powerful than themselves; and as such we contemplate their tragedy with stronger emotion and a more thorough conviction of the wrong that caused it. It is no wonder that when thousands of readers all over England read these sad histories which so powerfully awakened their indignation and their sympathies, they should have voiced their protest and have demanded that such institutions as Chancery and many others, should perish from the earth.

Much of Dickens' satire not only strikes at a particular evil,but in its very attack it suggests a kind of indirect satire upon something else. The world is not made up of isolated virtues and vices,but is an intricate complex of both,with the particular elements acting and reacting upon each other. Dickens shows this in his satire,making clear that society is bound together in one sympathetic whole. In the "Christmas Carol" (1843),the selfishness of Scrooge is directly satirized,but some of the most telling reproach is given by way of indirect satire,when one sees the humble Cratchits at their happy Christmas dinner-happy in spite of Scrooge. The implication is: how much more

happiness they could have, if the old miser were what he ought to be. Uncle Pumblechook is unsparingly satirized ( but withal, with great gusto) in all his self-importance and self-interestedness, but it is just these rather odious qualities in him which bring home to Pip the unselfishness and humility of Joe, and so ironically reflect upon his (Pip's) own vanity and snobbish ambition. The direct, unswerving satire of Dickens leaves no doubt in our minds that Pecksniff is the master-peice of whited sepulchres, but it is the patient, kind unassuming figure of Tom Pinch - who truly has in his heart all the spirituality to which Pecksniff makes such outrageous pretensions,- it is the sight of Tom Pinch in his simplicity beside the artificial grandeur of his master, which makes us hate Pecksniff with a cordial hatred. Dickens tells us directly enough about Old Deportment Turveydrop so that he stands before us in all his elegant emptiness, but what makes us really know him for the impostor he is, is the gentle, pure unselfishness of Caddy who in her humility and thankfulness believes him to be all he himself thinks he is. We are not deceived by Caddy's opinion: she is unwittingly the instrument of his total humiliation in our eyes. It is characteristic of Dickens' kindness and fairness of method

that he thus allows us to look at the objects of his satire from various angles. Mrs. Gargery, in the eyes of Pip is a shrew, pure and simple, with all the unpleasant attributes of her kind. Seen through the eyes of Joe, she appears in a softened light: "Such a fine figure of a woman as she once were, Pip", says tender-hearted, forgiving Joe after her injury.[1] Sir Leicester Deadlock is not only the stiff, proud old aristocrat, but the kind and noble master whose service Mrs. Rouncewell would not leave if she could. And what a varied outlook do we have upon Mr. Dombey, from the differing viewpoints of gentle and neglected Florence, admiring Miss Tox, the bullying old Major, and the inquisitively interested servants of the household. Satire of this kind seems to fall upon its object inevitably, like a judgment in life, for it takes into its scope so much of life itself.

Can anyone who has read carefully and appreciatively Dickens' satire, say that he is "a humorist, and nothing else" ? [2] Although it is true that the best satire is combined with humor, the satirical purpose is so obvious, and the results of it have been so powerful, that the claim of humor alone does not satisfy the ends accomplished. If Dickens had been only a humorist, people would not have risen in such indignant defense against his social satire; they would not have been so fearful of mere good-humored laughter. The novelist was a professed satirist,

[2] See Chapter I, p. 2.

[1] "Great Expectations, " Chap. XVI, p. 128.

with a purpose in his satire as clear as that in his humor. His aim was the betterment of humanity. His satire is essentially human; it is powerful in his portrayal of the evil, the pathos, and the absurdity of the life of human beings; and hence arouses in us a prfound realization of its truth and its relation to our daily existence.

## Chapter VII

## CONCLUSION

That Dickens was a teacher and reformer in his own way, few critics have dared to deny - the undebatable fact of his influence too clearly confronts them. That his virile satire was the chief instrument of his reforming power has likewise been generally conceded - it is the natural weapon for attack. Divergence of opinion has arisen concerning the realistic value and justice of Dickens' satire. His humor has always been enjoyed, too often for its own sake, although some critics have indeed appreciated the place it occupies in aiding Dickens' purpose of reform. The types of humorous and satiric appeal have been recognized, his purpose has been noted, but there has previously been no definite effort made to correlate his methods with their particular ethical value. By studying rather closely Dickens' manner of using his humor and satire, with a constant realization of his purpose, we have attempted to show the distinct ethical value of these two greatest instruments of his art.

In bringing to a close the discussion of the ethical value of Dickens' humor and satire, we recall the three questions which were raised at the end of the first chapter: Was Dickens' purpose ethical; Was the philosophy of life which dominated that purpose ethical; and, Was Dickens a true ethical teacher ? At the same time it is necessary to summon up a remembrance of

the three-fold definition of the term 'ethical' as we have applied it to Dickens: primarily in relation to conduct; ultimately in its final and absolute sense; and further more its interpretation in the light of the personal moral consciousness.

That Dickens' purpose was ethical in the highest sense of the word, there remains not the slightest doubt in the mind of one who has studied the clear sincerity and earnestness with which he states his aims in the prefaces to his novels. The philosophy which was revealed in the working out of his purpose, was one in which the realization of the evil in the world was balanced by a strong faith in the ultimate perfectibility of mankind. To accomplish his ends he satirized the evil, but showed that the light of hope lay in the growing brotherhood of men. Dominated by the best Christian ethics, he set out upon his task as an ethical teacher. Thus, in the absolute sense, judged by conformity to an ideal standard, Dickens had true ethical value. When we turn to the result of Dickens' teachings to see how they affected the conduct of society, we acknowledge a profound influence. Great evils, exposed by his satire to the glare of public indignation, were soon scorched in the heat of the reformer's wrath. Others, more insidious and less easily attacked, if not banished were at least made apparent so that everyone could beware of them. Upon personal conduct also, through the keen satirization of the peculiarities and errors of human beings, he exercised a vital influence for the good, which only becomes evident in the aggregate, but whose effect everyone who reads him may feel.

A final judgment of the ethical value of Dickens as a teacher, especially in his humor and satire, must be rendered according to the moral viewpoint of each different reader. In my opinion, Dickens was not only a deeply ethical teacher for his own time, but also for time to come. The specialized attacks upon evils which have since passed away (largely through Dickens' influence) have, of course, no longer any direct application, but we still realize their truth and feel the emotions ~~of~~ their portrayal arouses, and we know that the same evil can never return without the world recognizing it and branding it with shame before it has time to rise and grow again. Dickens' permanency depends in good part upon the fact that he pointed out wrongs, but did not offer a plan for reform; for the methods of reform change radically with time, but fundamental conceptions of morality remain more static. The great moral significance of Dickens' humor and satire is that its method of appeal was to universally human traits; that it suggested the relationships of each to all; bound humanity together by the power of its author's own kindly tolerance, and awakened the same broad understanding in us. A lesson such as this can never grow old nor useless.

Anyone who believes that it is of moral value to be able to see the faults and foibles of people in particular and in society in general, to know them 'for better or for worse', to see their reflection in himself; - and yet who believes joy and hope and love to be the ultimate goal toward which humanity should move - he will appreciate the ethical value of Dickens' humor

and satire. To do this is not necessarily to take the author's teaching as a whole life-creed. Life is many-sided, and ethical value is derived from many sources. Our ethical ideal will be a compound of many things, and one of them will surely be the dynamic, permamently inspiring force of Dickens' teaching.

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